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STAR WARS
OUTLAWS

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EDITOR'S NOTE

IN YOUR HANDS

GAMEINFORMER

WHEN I WAS A KID, I WAS ALWAYS THRILLED when mail would arrive addressed to me, but there was no post I anticipated more than one of the gaming mags to which I subscribed. Titles like *Nintendo Power*, *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, and *Game Informer* fed my enthusiasm for games and the culture surrounding them. The articles I read in those periodicals evolved my love of gaming, made me think critically about what I was playing, and led me to see games through the lens of their development and production.

In short, those magazines were a big part of shaping my hobby and eventual career. I often find myself hoping that there are both kids and adults out there who might read something we write in the magazine, and it helps propel their love of gaming in new directions, as those magazines once did for me.

MATT MILLER
Editor-In-Chief

This month, we launched a new standalone print subscription program for *Game Informer* – a single affordable price to get a whole year of physical issues in your mailbox, filled with exclusive features, informative previews, and thoughtful reviews, all selected to deepen an understanding of games, celebrate the industry that makes them, and help readers find the next big adventure they want to play at home. I hope its launch can invite new and old readers alike to discover what makes the magazine special.

If you're reading this, it's a good bet that you have already subscribed to the magazine, and I want to thank you for that. If the magazine is something you look forward to receiving, I hope you'll help us out by sharing that enthusiasm with others, gifting a subscription to a family member or friend, or resubscribing for yourself when the time comes.

I'm admittedly biased, but I think the magazine we produce at less than $2 an issue is a pretty remarkable deal compared to what else you can get for that sum these days.

Game Informer has been around for over 30 years, but the future of this type of long-form investigation into gaming that we do is at risk. Our new subscription program is the best way to keep *Game Informer* going, and it also supports all the other things we do as a gaming media destination, from videos and podcasts to daily website news and reviews.

The issue you hold in your hands is the best argument I can make. In this one issue, we've got an exclusive deep dive into the highly anticipated Star Wars Outlaws. We reveal the results of over 200,000 reader votes tallied to determine the greatest game of all time. We've got an investigative piece into the use of A.I. by indie developers. We highlight exclusive access and info on upcoming games, like Sand Land and Dune: Awakening. And there are reviews for big games like Dragon's Dogma 2, Balatro, and Rise of the Rōnin. We want *G.I.* to be fun, informative, and beautiful to page through, and we hope you find we've hit the mark.

Thanks for reading.
Play well. Be well.

GAMEINFORMER
STAR WARS
OUTLAWS

STAR WARS OUTLAWS

This month, we traveled to the coastal city of Malmö, Sweden, to spend two days at Massive Entertainment, the studio behind The Division. We played an all-new gameplay demo of Star Wars Outlaws and spoke to the team about creating the ultimate scoundrel fantasy. Read our cover story on p. 34.

GAMEINFORMER

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Editor-in-Chief
Matt Miller

Magazine Content Director
Kyle Hilliard

Online Content Director
Brian Shea
Still holding out hope for a Mace Windu return

Associate Editors
Wesley LeBlanc
Marcus Stewart
Charles Harte

Video Editor
Alex Van Aken

Production Director
Margaret Andrews
Basically married to the Star Wars outlaw

Lead Graphic Designer
Laleh Azarshin
Basically the Star Wars outlaw

Graphic Designer
Mónica Rexach Ortiz

Web Designer & Programmer
Jon Woodey

Operations Manager
Sarah Hansen
Best gaming companion is my lap dog Bofur

Marketing Coordinator
Rachel Castle

Contributors
Zachary Avery
Imran Khan
Joshua Khan
Jesse Vitelli

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For additional inquiries:
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STAFF SPOTLIGHT

Kyle Hilliard

Magazine Content Director

Everyone needs to calm down with the RPGs. I played Like a Dragon: Infinite Wealth and Final Fantasy VII Rebirth back-to-back, and now I am expected to jump right into Persona 3 Reload? And then Unicorn Overlord? And then Dragon's Dogma 2? Frankly, it's unfair. Do they think I am made of time? Sega, Square Enix, Atlus, Vanillaware, and Capcom should have had a conference call to sort this out. If nothing else, they could have at least agreed one of the games be bad and not worth playing. But no. They all had to be good and fun. How dare you, game developers.

Charles Harte

Associate Editor

Recently, I've been returning to my 3DS, which I haven't touched since the eShop shut down a year ago. In retrospect, I really didn't appreciate this neat little handheld as much as I should have during its life cycle. Between Pushmo and Pokémon X, I'm actually using the 3D slider a lot, and a pocket-sized 3DS is far more portable than a Switch. Most importantly, it's the only system that can play Kid Icarus: Uprising, one of my favorite games of all time. Here's hoping it gets ported to a modern console one day.

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Massive Entertainment is hard at work on this sprawling open-world experience in a galaxy far, far away, and we visited the studio in Malmö, Sweden for exclusive insight into what sets the game apart.

10 **THE 2024 GAME GAUNTLET**

With well over 200,000 votes cast by you, our readers, our bracket competition pits the best against the best, and the results are now in.

20 **BRAIN DRAIN**

The use of artificial intelligence continues to shake up the gaming industry. We spoke with a number of smaller studios about why they will or won't leverage the emerging technology.

46 **DUNE CRUISIN'**

Even as we mourn the loss of famed artist, Akira Toriyama, his work lives on in games like Sand Land. We got an exclusive look at the new game of open-world exploration, vehicle combat, and town-building.

78 **A FAMILY OF GAMES**

The collaborative game studio is both developer and publisher, and its work on games like Night in the Woods, Tunic, Overland, and the upcoming Usual Jane has all impressed. We spoke with the founders.

regulars

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NINTENDO SWITCH
PAPER MARIO
THE THOUSAND-YEAR DOOR
Available 5/23/24
EVERYONE
E
ESRB
Mild Fantasy Violence
Mild Suggestive Themes
Nintendo

Nintendo Switch Lite plays all games that support handheld mode.
Game and systems sold separately.
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Replies

APPEARING IN A MAILBOX NEAR YOU

Hi *G.I.* team! I really wish it was easier to get a print subscription of the magazine. I genuinely can't figure out how to do it anymore. I miss getting home from work and finding a new issue of *G.I.* waiting for me! Please bring back print subscriptions! If there's still a way to do it, could you provide detailed instructions? **– Josh via email**

My question is, why can I not get a print subscription to the magazine? I don't think shelling out $8 a month ($96 a year) is a good option. I do enjoy print magazines, but would love the option to buy a monthly subscription at a more reasonable rate. **– Matt via email**

I love the articles about upcoming games but as a reader who prefers print editions of your magazines I would like to receive them in the month they are issued. I'm still having trouble getting my physical copies of your magazine and would love to see improvements in that area. **– SolidMoogle via email**

↳ *Look, we know that getting a print subscription to* Game Informer *has been, well, challenging to say the least. The most consistent piece of feedback we've received lately is that our readers are frustrated by how difficult it is to reliably receive a print subscription to our magazine. Because of that, we prioritized creating a new way for you to get each new issue delivered straight to your mailbox.*

This new, standalone option is currently available to people in the U.S. by visiting Subscription.GameInformer.com. That's right, you can order a subscription from the comfort of your home and for a fraction of the cost of buying them individually. Not only that, but you'll be directly supporting the folks who make this magazine. Game Informer *has been around for nearly 33 years at this point, and we want to carry that legacy forward as far into the future as possible. We truly appreciate all the passionate pleas our community has passed along in recent months, which is the reason this new standalone subscription exists. From the bottom of our hearts, thank you for maintaining your love for the work that we pour our everything into.*

CHASING PAST GLORIES

It makes me so upset to see how many remakes were released on the Nintendo Switch. Don't get me wrong, I love Nintendo's older releases, so seeing a remake of a game isn't bad on its own, but the first three years of the Switch's life were spent porting over the Wii U games that didn't sell well.

I understand the business side of the argument; remakes are easier to make and still generate revenue. But charging $50 for a virtually one-to-one remake of Mario vs. Donkey Kong is pretty wrong in my opinion. From my perspective, if they had put that time and effort that went into remaking games into making larger releases at a lower frequency, the overall roster of games on the Switch would be better. **– Getty via email**

↳ *We definitely understand your frustration with the influx of remakes and remasters on Switch, particularly in recent years. After all, three of Nintendo's biggest releases in the first half of this year are Mario vs. Donkey Kong, Luigi's Mansion 2 HD, and Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door. However, this is most likely due to the shift in focus towards Nintendo's next system. One of the biggest reasons for the Switch's success is that it consolidated its developer pool; no longer did developers need to choose to develop for Nintendo's console or handheld system. Instead, developers could make one game to service both sides of that coin.*

Of course, remakes and remasters are nothing new to Nintendo's hybrid system, but to be fair, the Switch's library of exclusive titles arguably rivals that of any platform in history. In the first year alone, we received The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild and Super Mario Odyssey, two all-new games from Nintendo's two biggest series. And while 2017 might be hard to match, we still received all-new, critically acclaimed entries in series like Kirby, Pokémon, Luigi's Mansion, Metroid, Animal Crossing, Super Smash Bros., Splatoon, Xenoblade Chronicles, and plenty of others. Yes, the cadence of these new releases has slowed as the Switch makes its way through what we assume is its final year as Nintendo's flagship platform, but that's true of most systems. Would we like more original content this year? For sure. But we're grateful for the stellar library we have and are extremely excited for whatever's next.

The Pulse

We asked the community what they've been playing over the last month and have compiled power rankings of the current hottest games among our readers.

1. **Helldivers 2** ▲
2. **Final Fantasy VII Rebirth** ▼
3. **Dragon's Dogma 2** NEW RELEASE
4. **Rise of the Rōnin** NEW RELEASE
5. **Baldur's Gate 3** ▲
6. **Hi-Fi Rush** ▲
7. **The Finals** ▲
8. **Apex Legends** ▲
9. **MLB The Show 24** NEW RELEASE
10. **Princess Peach: Showtime!** NEW RELEASE

Soundoff: Games On Repeat

We asked our readers and community which games they've spent the most time with in their lives. Here are some of their responses!

Skyrim (in all its various forms) and it isn't even close anymore. I spent more time playing games when I was a kid in the '80s and '90s, but so much of that time was spent on many different games. Now, I only have a limited amount of time to play, so I usually spend it on the same game. **– Paul via Facebook**

Black Ops 2. I don't know how many hundreds or even thousands of hours I spent with my homies. Basically did every Zombie Easter Egg. Such good ol' times. **– Miguel via Instagram**

World of Warcraft, unfortunately. 17,500 hours before I quit back in January 2021. I have plenty of other games with 5,000-plus hours as well, but WoW is the only one I have actually tallied and know how much. Other close games would be Dragon Age: Origins, Final Fantasy VII, and Skyrim. **– Cheyenne via Facebook**

I played City of Heroes for seven and a half years until shutdown on the Champion Server and my namesake main had 10k hours on him, not including the time on my alts. **– Cobalt via Twitter**

Red Dead Redemption 2. I played too much that the disc literally melted and the device couldn't read it. **– Adam via Instagram**

Likely Trails of Cold Steel 1 – played it through multiple times (and the sequel as well on PS Vita) because it would be a few years before the third game was released in the U.S. **– Samantha via Twitter**

↓ **Join the conversation**

Send your questions, comments, and rants to Feedback@GameInformer.com

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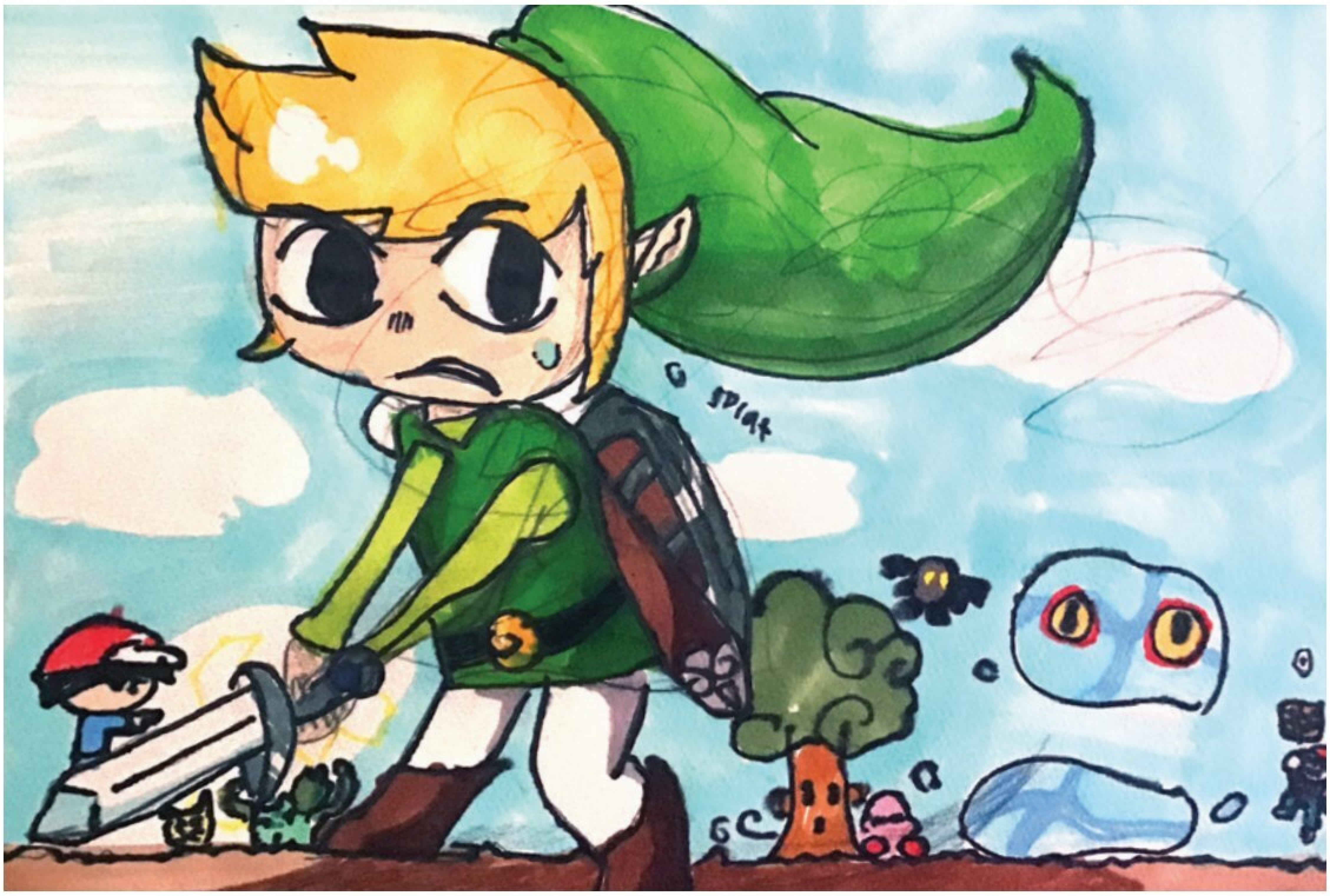


Reader art submission: Ariane Elmquist, age 10

↙ **Submit your art for a chance to win a prize!**

Submitting your artwork grants *Game Informer* authorization to publish the work in our print and/or digital channels, including social media. Please include your name so we can give you credit.
Email to: ReaderArt@GameInformer.com

ONE MORE SHOT

I keep thinking about games like Redfall, and how it could've been a great single-player game had Arkane chosen that route. Are there any failed video games you wish had a second chance at development or maybe even rebooted for a different audience? **– O.G. (Original Gamer) via email**

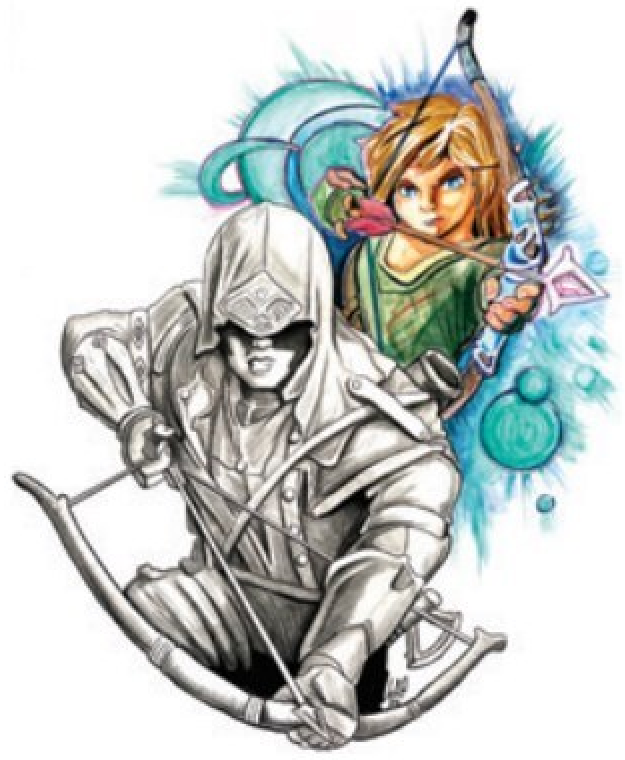
↳ *This is a tough subject given how many games are greenlit purely based on their original visions, which sometimes are a primary contributing factor to their downfall. But it's still a fun thought experiment! We've even seen some developers bring back games that initially failed to find an audience, like Gearbox Publishing with Gigantic, but let's dive deeper down this rabbit hole with a few "what ifs."*

What if Marvel's Avengers and Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League stuck to single-player, story-driven content with no live-service elements? What if Blizzard didn't dramatically slow content for Overwatch 1 to focus on Overwatch 2 for years? There are others that just needed something intangible to bring the good, disparate elements together, like Forspoken. Some of these don't even require going back to the drawing board, since they're already good games, like Immortals of Aveum, Marvel's Midnight Suns, or Knockout City. Games like those might just need another chance to find an audience.

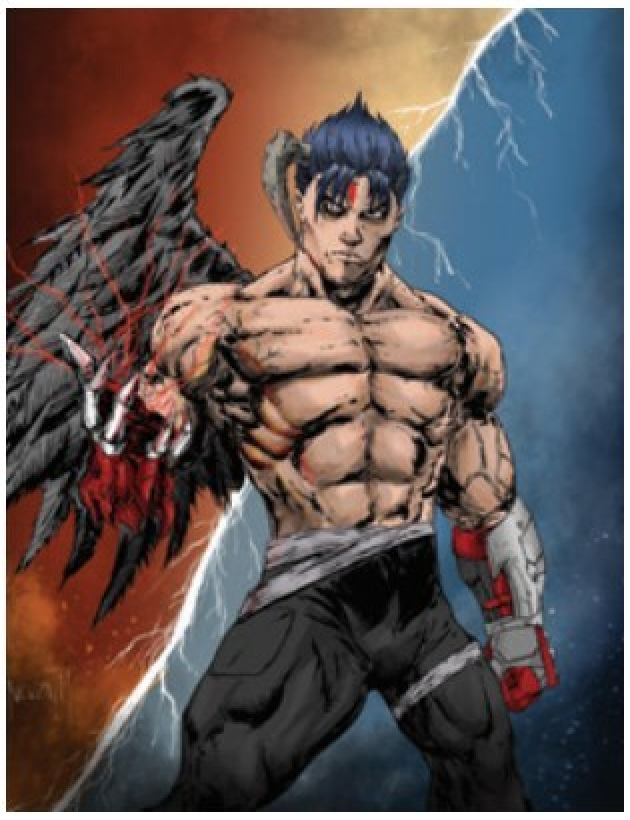
SHOUTOUT TO THE INDIES

I'd like to give a special "thank you" to indie game studios for all of the hard work they put into making great game experiences. I think that these studios don't always get the appreciation and respect they deserve. Many of these studios are running with small teams (or even one or two people in some instances!), and yet they still manage to deliver riveting experiences that are unique and special. I especially love it when I see indie studios that are eager to see what their fanbase is saying about their games and then try to work towards implementing changes and improvements to their games based on the feedback. It might seem like that's something that should go without saying in the game development world, but when small studios take the time to make those connections on top of everything else on their plates, it feels special. **– Gingin1964 via email**

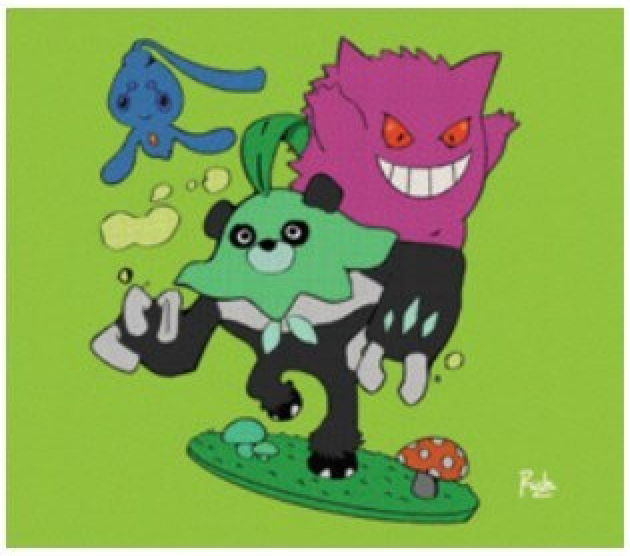
↳ *Absolutely! Indie studios are responsible for some of the greatest experiences we've seen over the last couple of decades, and you're right: They often don't receive the acclaim they deserve. Just like we say about telling your favorite content creators you appreciate the work they do, let your favorite indie developers know you love their work. It'll likely mean a lot more to them than you realize.*



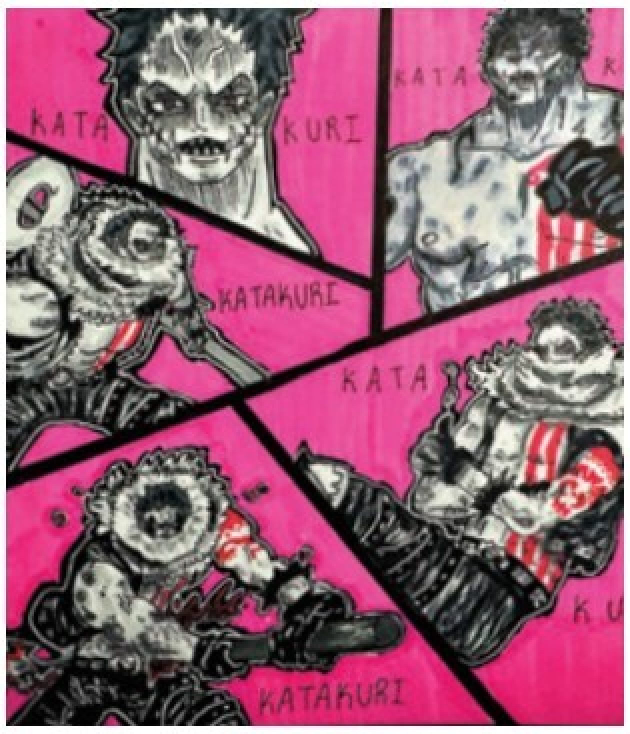
Reader art submission:
Keith Pumphrey



Reader art submission:
Nevzat Mutlu

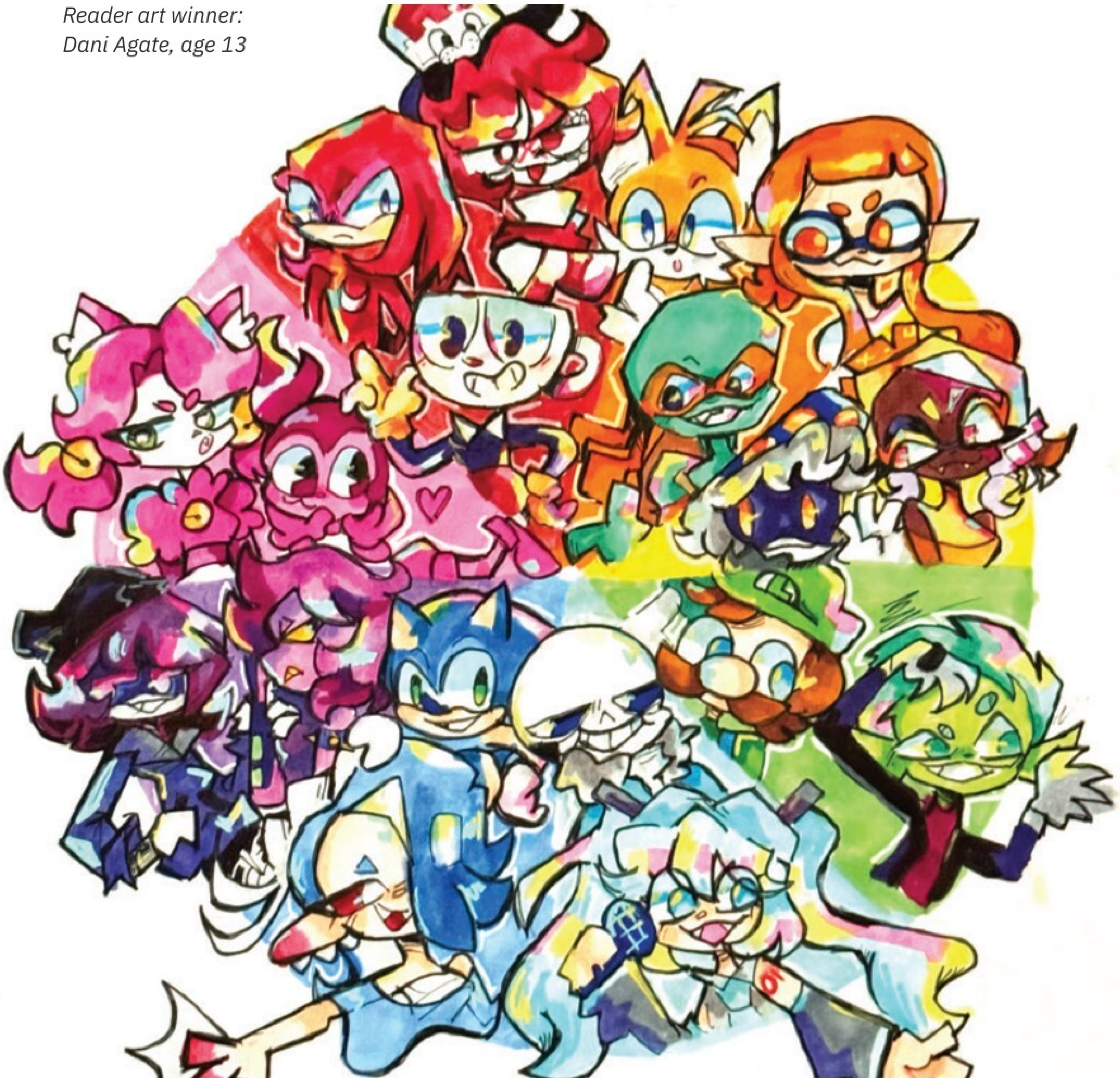


Reader art submission:
Richie Eze Ogbonna



Reader art submission:
Muhammad Zain Lakhani

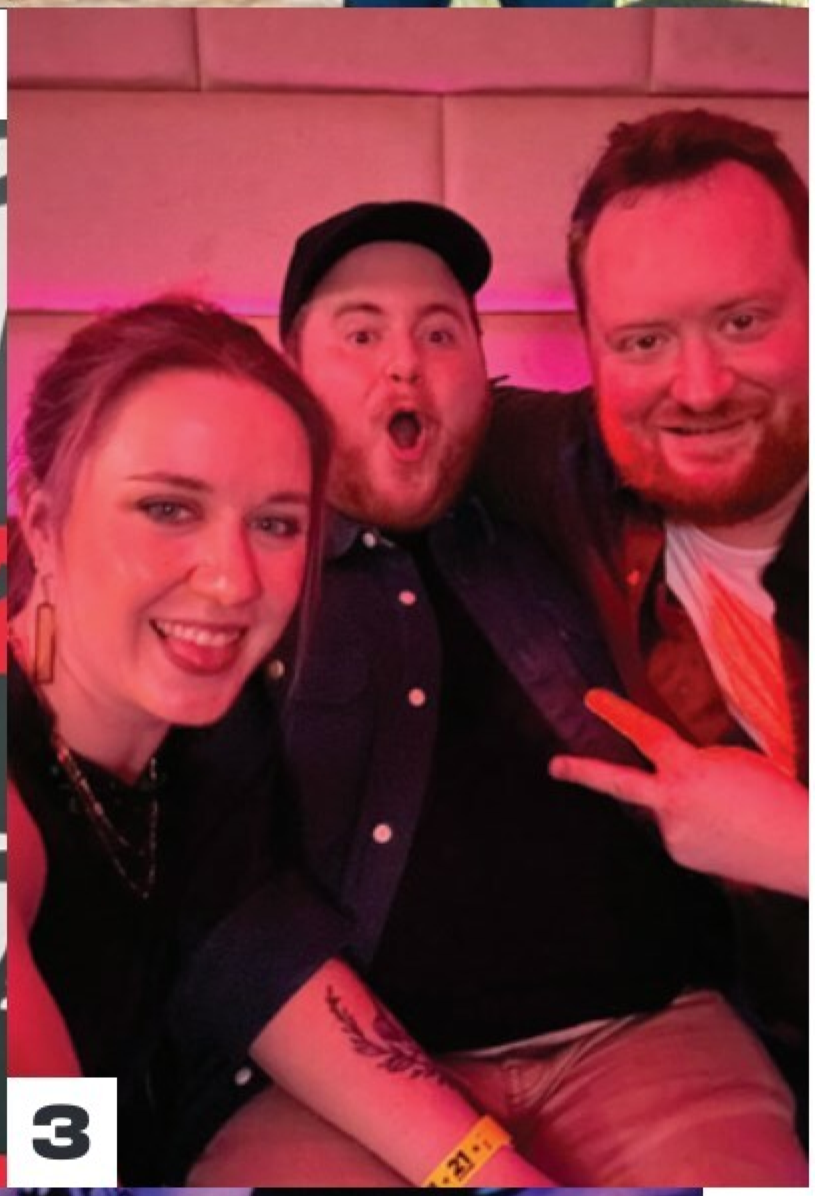
Reader art winner:
Dani Agate, age 13



1

TOPSPIN 2K25

2



3

4

GI SPY

Each month, we attend events and visit developers to get the latest information on the hottest games. Check out some of our latest photos from around the video game industry.

1.

Marcus flew out to Bandai Namco's US headquarters in Irvine, California to spend his afternoon playing Sand Land. He's still dumping out his shoes as of this writing. Read his in-depth feature on p. 46

2.

Last month, Brian traveled to Indian Wells, California, to get his hands on TopSpin 2K25 (p. 57) and Fall Out Boy's Pete Wentz (who is curating the soundtrack for the game) showed up to talk some tennis. Because obviously

3.

While at PAX East, Alex hung out with owner of Yaniir resin dice and former *Game Informer* graphic designer Jen Vinson and Fortyseven PR manager Kyle Prahl

4.

Brian's interview with Street Fighter 6 producer Shuhei Matsumoto and director Takayuki Nakayama was fun, but not as much fun as the Capcom Cup X afterparty. You can read the full interview on p. 18 ■

THE 2024 GAME GAUNTLET

We asked *Game Informer* readers to vote on the greatest games of all time. Here are the results!

BY BRIAN SHEA

NO MATTER THE INDUSTRY – sports, television, movies, or games – the debate of "the greatest of all time" inevitably comes up. These debates are often full of superfluous apples-to-oranges comparisons and, as a result, are unlikely to come up with a definitive answer everyone will be happy with. But that's what makes them so fun. In that spirit, we took the month of March to hold our own bracket-style tournament, voted on by our readers and community members, to see what you say is the greatest video game of all time.

We assembled the bracket based on a combination of factors, including our 2018 Reader Vote that we held to coincide with the release of our 300th issue – after all, this was another reader-voted event! Using the results of that 2018 Reader Vote, combined with input from staff members, general sentiment across various online communities, and critical reception for more recent games, we assembled the starting bracket of 64 games.

Despite those methods, we still had exclusions that raised eyebrows within our community. Common games brought up by our readers when it came to those that didn't make it into the original 64 include Deux Ex, Super Smash Bros. Melee, Max Payne, and Ori and the Will of the Wisps. But those debates, as they raged on in our comments section, proved just how subjective a title like "greatest of all time" often is.

Across six rounds, well over 200,000 votes were cast to determine the outcome. If you're ready to see how the voting played out, head to the next page for the full bracket tournament where we went from 64 games down to 1 in just a few weeks! ■

What were the most significant omissions in your eyes? What about the biggest surprises? Did the correct game win? Or did you witness a robbery in the early rounds? Are there other tournaments you'd like to see on other gaming topics? Send your thoughts to Feedback@GameInformer.com

CLOSE CALLS

Pokémon Red/Blue vs. Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater

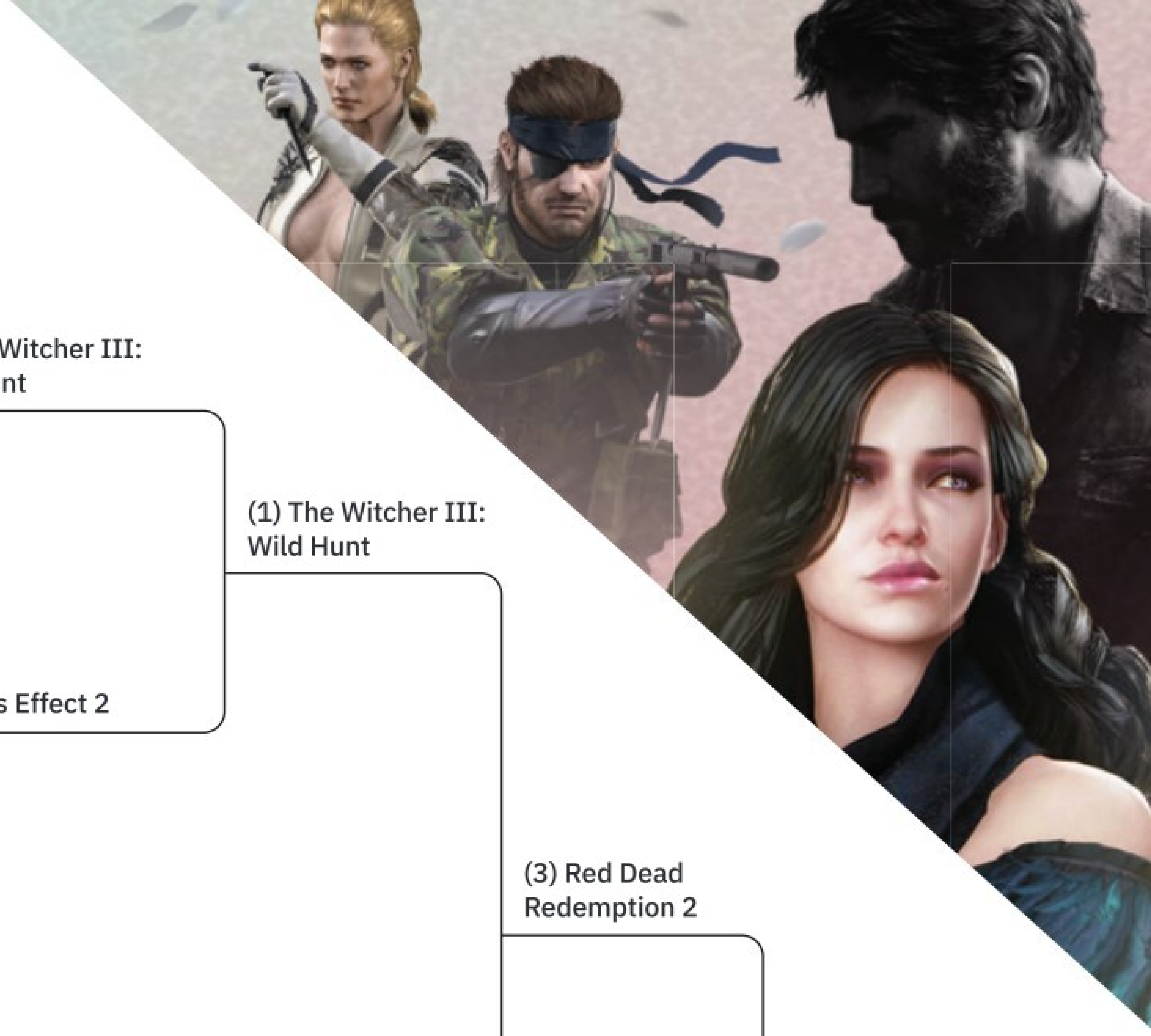
The closest matchup in the tournament saw Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater eke out a win over the seminal Pokémon entries by just 12 votes.

The Last of Us Part II vs. Metroid Prime

One of the biggest upsets in the tournament was also one of the closest, as Samus took out Ellie with a margin of just 23 votes.

The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past vs. Half-Life 2

A difference of fewer than 90 votes separated these two classic games, with Zelda winning the day.



REGION 1

(1) The Witcher III: Wild Hunt
(16) Silent Hill 2
(8) Halo: Combat Evolved
(9) The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker
(4) Final Fantasy VI
(13) Marvel's Spider-Man
(5) Mass Effect 2
(12) Doom (2016)
(3) Red Dead Redemption 2
(14) Castlevania: Symphony of the Night
(6) Shadow of the Colossus
(11) World of Warcraft
(7) Kingdom Hearts II
(10) Super Mario 64
(2) The Last of Us Part II
(15) Metroid Prime

(1) The Witcher III: Wild Hunt
(9) The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker
(13) Marvel's Spider-Man
(5) Mass Effect 2
(3) Red Dead Redemption 2
(6) Shadow of the Colossus
(10) Super Mario 64
(15) Metroid Prime

(1) The Witcher III: Wild Hunt
(5) Mass Effect 2
(3) Red Dead Redemption 2
(10) Super Mario 64

(1) The Witcher III: Wild Hunt
(3) Red Dead Redemption 2

(3) Red Dead Redemption 2

REGION 3

(1) The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time
(16) Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare
(8) Halo 3
(9) Grand Theft Auto V
(4) Resident Evil 4 (2005)
(13) Pac-Man
(5) God of War (2018)
(12) Uncharted 4: A Thief's End
(3) Chrono Trigger
(14) League of Legends
(6) Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic
(11) Animal Crossing: New Horizons
(7) Super Mario World
(10) Fallout: New Vegas
(2) Baldur's Gate 3
(15) Super Smash Bros. Ultimate

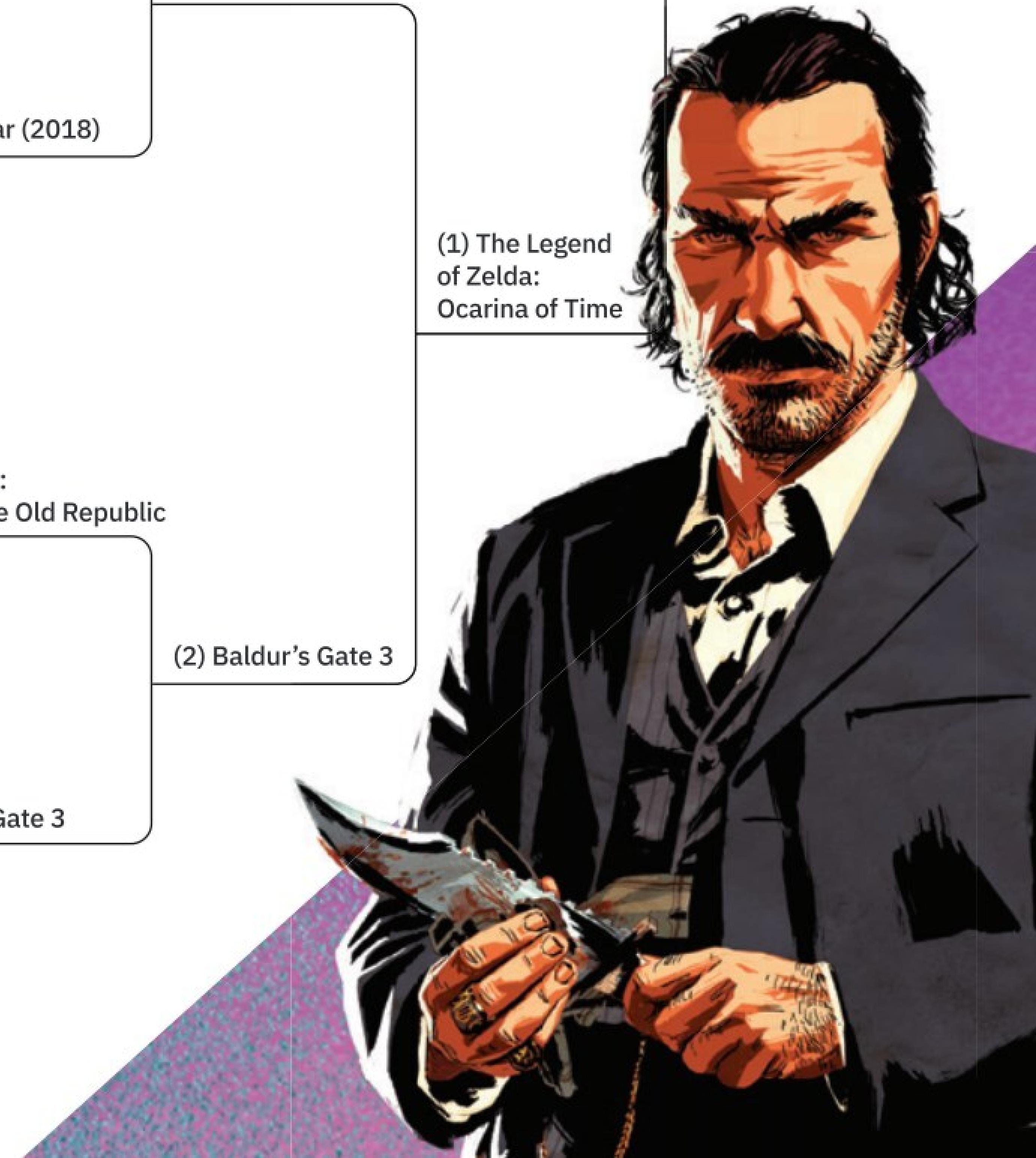
(1) The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time
(9) Grand Theft Auto V
(4) Resident Evil 4 (2005)
(5) God of War (2018)
(3) Chrono Trigger
(6) Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic
(7) Super Mario World
(2) Baldur's Gate 3

(1) The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time
(5) God of War (2018)
(6) Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic
(2) Baldur's Gate 3

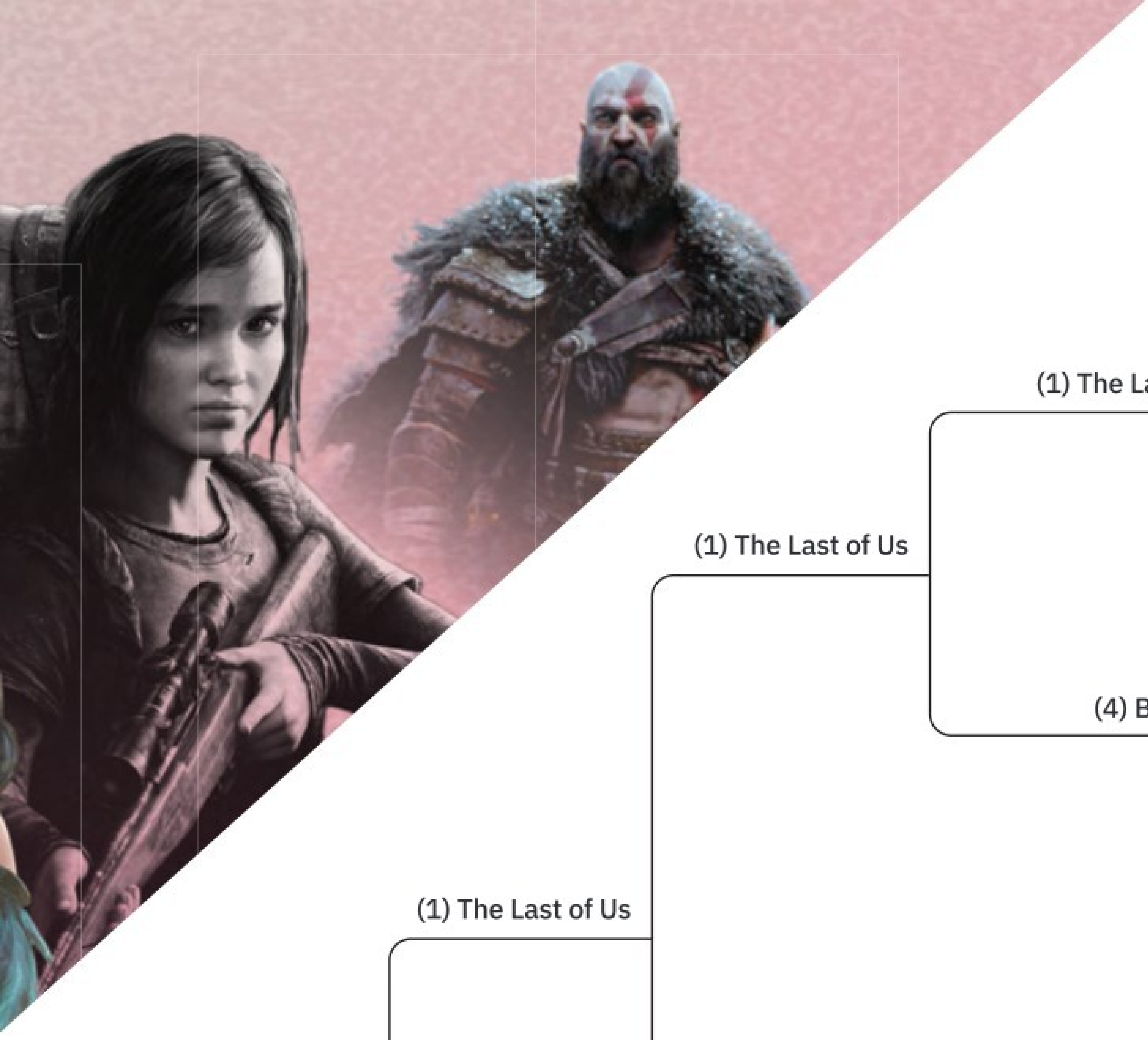
(1) The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time
(2) Baldur's Gate 3

(1) The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time

♛
(1) The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time



Numbers in parentheses represent that game's initial seeding in the bracket

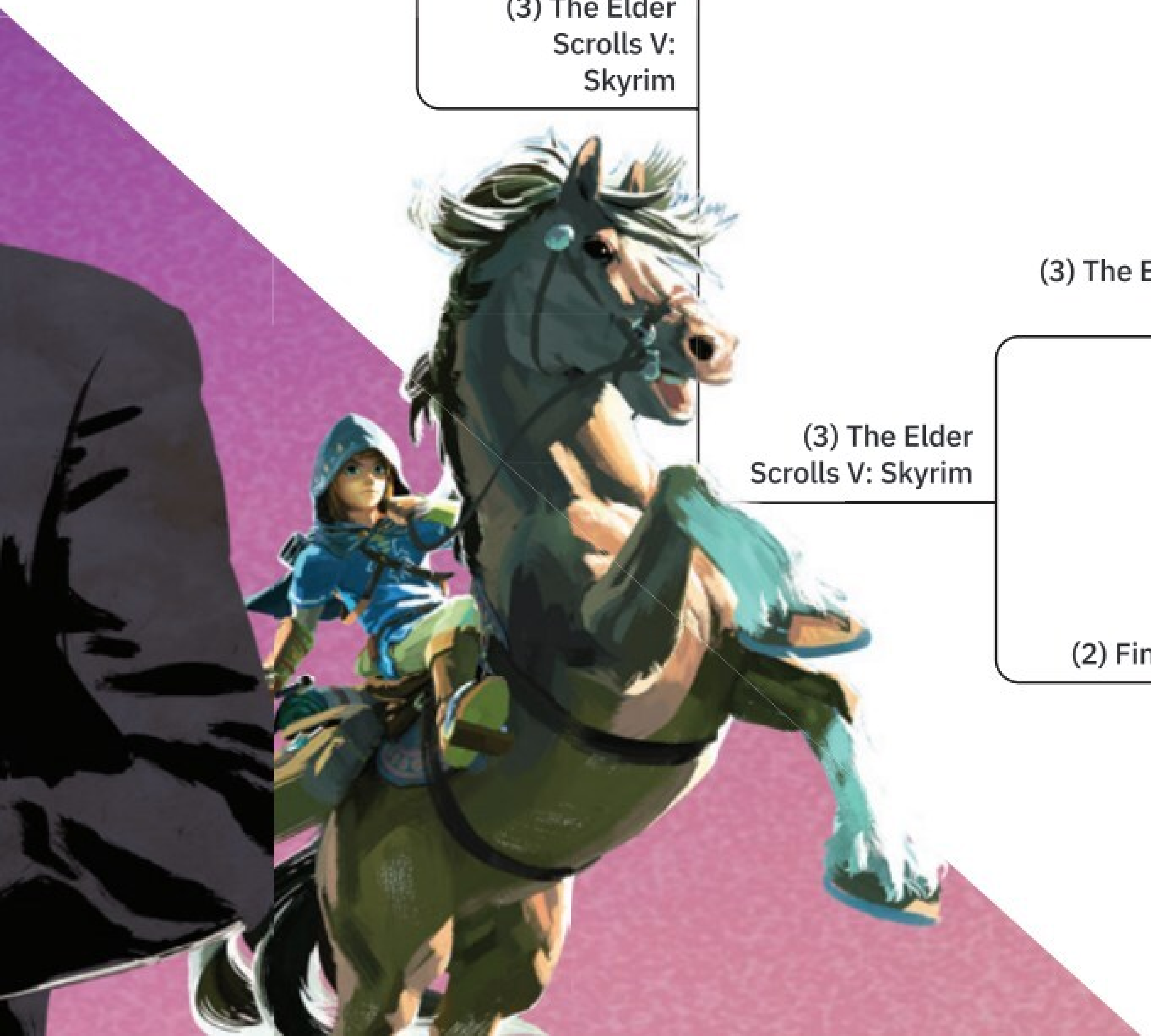


REGION 2

- (3) The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
  - (1) The Last of Us
    - (1) The Last of Us
      - (1) The Last of Us
        - (1) The Last of Us
          - (1) The Last of Us
          - (16) Dragon Age: Origins
        - (9) Portal 2
          - (8) Super Metroid
          - (9) Portal 2
      - (4) BioShock
        - (4) BioShock
          - (4) BioShock
          - (13) Minecraft
        - (12) Batman: Arkham City
          - (5) Final Fantasy X
          - (12) Batman: Arkham City
    - (2) The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild
      - (6) Metal Gear Solid
        - (14) Tetris
          - (3) Bloodborne
          - (14) Tetris
        - (6) Metal Gear Solid
          - (6) Metal Gear Solid
          - (11) Street Fighter II
      - (2) The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild
        - (10) Persona 5 Royal
          - (7) Fortnite
          - (10) Persona 5 Royal
        - (2) The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild
          - (2) The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild
          - (15) Super Mario Galaxy

REGION 4

  - (3) The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
    - (1) Elden Ring
      - (1) Elden Ring
        - (1) Elden Ring
          - (1) Elden Ring
          - (16) Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas
        - (9) Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater
          - (8) Pokémon Red/Blue
          - (9) Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater
      - (4) The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past
        - (4) The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past
          - (4) The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past
          - (13) Hades
        - (12) Half-Life 2
          - (5) Undertale
          - (12) Half-Life 2
    - (3) The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
      - (3) The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
        - (3) The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
          - (3) The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim
          - (14) Destiny 2
        - (6) Fallout 3
          - (6) Fallout 3
          - (11) Nier Automata
      - (2) Final Fantasy VII
        - (10) Super Mario Bros. 3
          - (7) Diablo II
          - (10) Super Mario Bros. 3
        - (2) Final Fantasy VII
          - (2) Final Fantasy VII
          - (15) Xenoblade Chronicles



JOKER
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AFTERWORDS

How a Solo Developer Played His Cards Right to Create Balatro

IN JUST ONE MONTH since the release of Balatro, the Poker-inspired deckbuilding roguelike took the gaming world by storm. It earned rave reviews (including a 9.5 out of 10 from us), positioned itself as a Game of the Year contender, and sold 1 million copies. To the delight of many, a mobile version was recently announced to be in the works.

For most players, Balatro came out of nowhere and its sole developer, LocalThunk, is just as mysterious. The highly private creator doesn't share his real name, but I was able to speak with him about his game development history, how he came up with the idea for Balatro, and his reaction to its positive reception. **INTERVIEW BY MARCUS STEWART**

What drew you to wanting to create games as a hobby, and how long have you been making games?

Well, when I was in university, I was taking this mechanical engineering course. And I was watching a lot of videos from YouTube of people playing video games, and I always wanted to make a video game. So that's kind of when it started. I was still in engineering school, and in my spare time, I'd start making simulations more than video games and some little games. And I made a kind of a Risk-type game ... and I got really, really into the actual process of making games and simulations. So I ended up dropping out of engineering, and I went into a computer science program because of that. And basically, the entire time I was in that program, when I'd get home from school, I would just make games and keep coding, and

JOKER
ROUTE 210-A
STOPS FOR
11-JACK
12-QUEEN
13-KING
Joseph J. Joker

it's something I held on to after I left school. I just always did that.

The main thing with it, though, is I never really shared it with an audience. Either it was mostly just for me, or I would share it with a couple of friends and family that I knew who would appreciate these things as a way to share that part. So yeah, I've been making games for probably almost 10 years, I guess. But this is the first time I've made anything public at all.

How did the idea for Balatro come to be? What was special about this concept that made you want to share it with the public?

Well, the concept came from – it's a game called Big Two. It's a Cantonese game. If you've ever played a game called Presidents or Cheat or Janitor or A--hole, it's the same type of game where you have a hand of cards, and you select some of the cards and play them down. So it's actually based on a game like that. It's not based on Poker. And I used to play this game, Big Two, all the time with my friends when I was in high school and growing up. So, I wanted to make an online version of that game to play with them during the pandemic.

I started making the bare-bones fundamental engine. And when I was doing that, I was watching YouTube videos about Luck Be A Landlord at the time. And I really liked a lot of the design elements of that game. I thought I could transition this into a game like that, where you're facing off against the score requirement and you're not facing enemies, per se. And I just liked a lot about the core design aspects of that game. I kind of combined those ideas. And after a while, it ended up being one of the more polished things I'd ever worked on, so I thought it'd be kind of fun to put it on Steam.

I read that you're not really a Poker player and that you're not particularly a fan of it. If that's the case, how did you decide to incorporate Poker into this concept?

I'm a little bit of an outsider in terms of indie games. I didn't really play a lot of indie games. I know a lot of the theming with indie games is one of the things that always kind of put me off with it. It's very fantasy-heavy. The theming was always a barrier to entry for me.

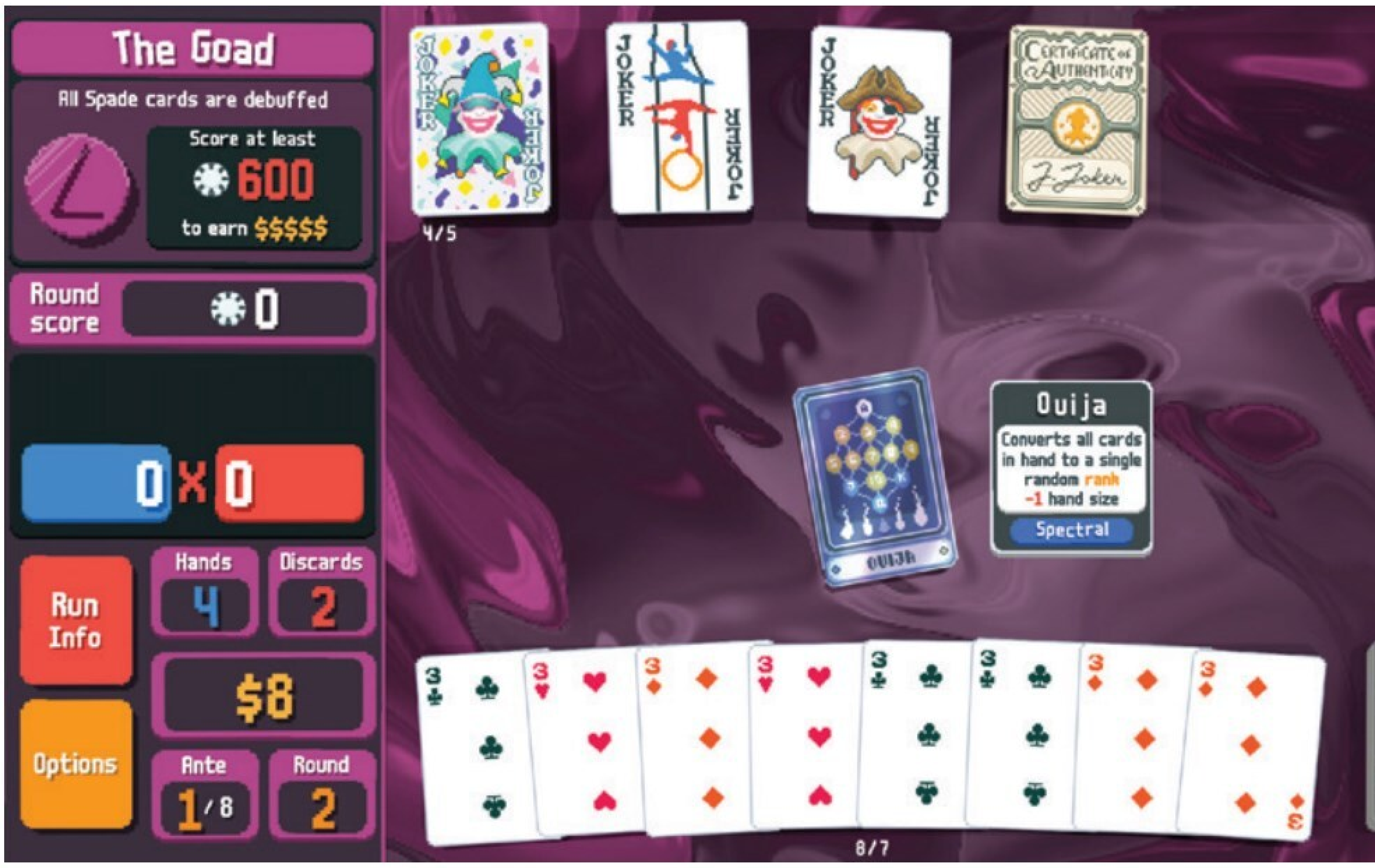
When I was making this game, I thought, playing cards: what's something that's thematically tied to playing cards that has a lot of identity, iconography, imagery people are familiar with that they can lean on to get into the game instead of having to learn about so that they can get into the game? And I thought Poker is the perfect thing because it has all these interesting visuals, sounds, terminology people are generally familiar with. More than most other card games do, it kind of has this aura about it as a card game, more so than like a Solitaire would or Cribbage or something.

I lean really heavily on the theming because I knew the theming was such a strong part of Poker, even if the mechanics I don't really care for with Poker. I don't really play it. I know how it works, I have played it before, but it's not really a game I enjoy.

How does it feel to have created something that's garnered such an overwhelmingly positive reception?

I mean, it's cool. It wasn't something I was expecting. And again, I think the thing I'm most excited about is that I was able to do it in the first place [and] stick to this process for such a long time. And it was so much work. But sticking to that process and believing it's going to work out. So I'm most excited about that, and I'm most excited that I ended up making this thing that I wanted to make. And it's really nice that people also seem to really love it, too. ■

Visit GameInformer.com to read the full, unabridged version of this interview



All Spade cards are debuffed

Converts all cards in hand to a single random rank
-1 hand size

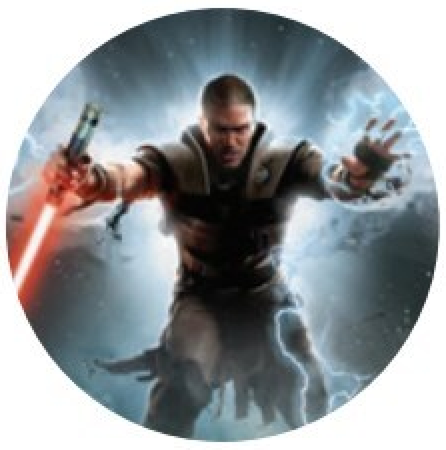
TOP FIVE

STAR WARS GAME CHARACTERS

While many Star Wars games include faces fans know and love from the iconic movies, others create entirely new ones, adding to series lore in memorable and meaningful ways

BY CHARLES HARTE

1 **Cal Kestis** is the star of Respawn's fantastic Star Wars Jedi series. In an era where Jedi are virtually extinct, it's easy to empathize with him. Combined with a stellar performance from Cameron Monaghan and the adorable BD-1, he's quickly become a fan favorite.



2 The Force Unleashed games told the tale of Vader's secret apprentice, a brutal and powerful Sith known as **Starkiller**. His ability to stop a Star Destroyer mid-flight might be a tad overpowered for the movies, but it made for a great video game.

3 **HK-47**, a droid in Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic, is a party member with a hilariously violent twist. Unlike most droids, he craves combat and brutality and constantly calls the player "meatbag." Equal parts funny and memorable, he's also great in a fight.

4 Many of these characters only appear in a game or two, but not **Kyle Katarn**. With four major appearances in Star Wars video games across eight years, his journey from Stormtrooper to Jedi Knight earned him a place in the hearts of gamers all over.

5 **Darth Revan**'s mask is perhaps the most iconic image from Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic, but there's more to their character than meets the eye. Between a dark past and a world-shattering plot twist, Revan is one of the best parts of a fantastic game. ■

FIGHTING FOR MILLIONS

We attend Capcom Cup X and watch the champion walk away with the biggest prize to date

BY BRIAN SHEA

UMA
UMA
UMA
MENARD
28

Now that Street Fighter 6 has been available for nine months, the best players in the world have been able to familiarize themselves with the ins and outs of the title, establish their mains, and figure out all the best strategies to come out on top. Capcom Cup X, the 10th instance of Capcom's climactic Street Fighter esports tournament, brought the 48 best players from various corners of the globe to compete for the largest prize in fighting game tournament history.

Taking place at Avalon Hollywood in Los Angeles, California, Capcom Cup X served as the culmination of various feeder tournaments from the Capcom Pro Tour and other qualifiers. Throughout the tournament, the mid-sized venue was electric, with the crowd hanging on every match, living and dying with the successes and failures of their favorite players. The enthusiasm was impressive for the multi-day event, particularly since the energy persisted through the 10-hour final day.

Players brought their best Lukes, Rashids, JPs, Dee Jays, and Kens to the tournament, but a rare Juri player rose above the rest to claim the top prize. Hailing from Taiwan, Wang "Uma" Yuanhao defeated Hong Kong's Chris Wong to take home the Capcom Cup X trophy and his $1 million share of the overall $2 million prize pool.

Uma, who previously competed in Street Fighter V as Ibuki under the tag Kagami, didn't want to get too outlandish or flashy with his play as Juri. Instead, he relied on the moves that got him to the tournament in the first place and fell back on his rigorous training and ways to ease his nervousness.

"I usually play about 12 hours a day," Uma says. "At the start [of the tournament], I'm always very nervous; like, in the Pool section, I'm very nervous, and then after that, during the Top 16, I just try to imagine I'm at home playing and there's no pressure."

Uma credits the improvements Street Fighter 6 brings to the table – particularly in online play – with allowing him to be so effective in his preparations. "Because Street Fighter 6 has really good netcode, I can actually play smoothly against Japan," he says. "Japan has a lot of different characters that I could train the matchups, so that's how I got my variation and strategy."

With Street Fighter 6 continuing to grow and a community possessing a level of enthusiasm like I witnessed on that Sunday evening in Hollywood, it's clear Capcom understands that events like Capcom Cup are worth investing in. "We're hoping there will continue to be events that will allow us to continue promoting the game and raising awareness so that people can finally get interested if they haven't yet," Street Fighter 6 director Takayuki Nakayama says.

As the festivities wound down, Capcom president and COO Haruhiro Tsujimoto took the stage to announce the overall prize pool will return to a more standardized amount for Capcom Cup XI in 2025. However, the grand prize will remain at $1 million, cementing that the world's top players will continue to hone their skills in one of the best fighting games in recent memory. ■

For more on Street Fighter 6, head to the next page to read our interview with the director and producer of the game

INTERVIEW

Back for Another Round

Nine months after the successful launch of Street Fighter 6, we catch up with the director and producer

BY BRIAN SHEA

Following the underwhelming launch of Street Fighter V in 2016, Capcom rethought how it should approach its long-running fighting franchise. These conversations resulted in Takayuki Nakayama and Shuhei Matsumoto stepping into the director and producer roles, respectively.

The duo has largely been credited with righting the ship on Street Fighter V in its post-launch phase and for the exceptional launch state of Street Fighter 6 when it launched last June. I recently sat down with Nakayama and Matsumoto to discuss the continued evolution of Street Fighter 6.

In the time since we last spoke, Street Fighter 6 released to positive reception; it was one of *Game Informer*'s highest-scoring reviews of 2023. How has Street Fighter 6 fan reception been from your perspective?

Shuhei Matsumoto, Producer: I'm noticing that the number of monthly players is increasing over time. The rate that it's increasing is more so compared to Street Fighter V, so that's obviously a great thing for the team. We weren't expecting there to be as many players as we're seeing right now in Fighting Ground, especially with Modern Controls. We're seeing a big increase in players who are engaged using Modern Controls. That's a nice, big surprise and we're excited about the changes.

Takayuki Nakayama, Director: I'm seeing a significant increase in fan art on social media, so I'm super stoked about that. [Laughs]

What was it like having such a different starting point with Street Fighter 6?
TN: In comparison to Street Fighter V, there's obviously this great momentum and a lot of praise from everyone. Some of the issues we felt like we were dealing with when developing V was the lack of content, which we received a lot of criticism for, so that was something that we really wanted to put in effort to address. So, as we were developing for 6, we were so worried about this lack of content that we weren't sure, like, "Is this enough? Are we really doing enough for the game? I want to make more, but I don't know!" I guess that's the big difference between developing V and 6.

How do you decide on the characters you release as DLC?
TN: In terms of how we decide on the characters themselves, region or country – where they're from – is really important. We tried to think of, "Where do we really want to highlight?" From an outsider's perspective, when you see the characters themselves, you might think, "What's the significance of them? What's their connection?" But as you play World Tour and Arcade mode, those become more evident and clear that they're connected in some way. There's more story to be evolved in the future, so hopefully you're looking forward to that.

Looking at the post-launch content you've released already, you've already added one of my favorite Street Fighter V characters with Rashid, but what were you hoping to accomplish with this most recent addition of Ed?
TN: From my perspective, Ed is actually a very important character in the series now. He was actually the reason why we have Modern Controls in Street Fighter 6, because in Street Fighter V, that was the character we tested out with simplified commands for specials and that eventually evolved and we learned from implementing him in Street Fighter V, and we took those learnings to create Modern Controls in Street Fighter 6.

In that respect, he's very important from a control standpoint, but he's also the reason why we have World Tour! When we were working on Street Fighter V and Ed was released, I was looking at my feed on social media and I took note of this comment from someone who said they're a really big fan of Ed and they love how he looks, they love how he plays. "I feel like I could actually play a fighting game! It's my first fighting game and it's so much fun!" But Street Fighter V doesn't have a large-scope, single-player mode like World Tour. And so they didn't like seeing Ed get bodied by other players. And because he or she loved him so much, I felt the responsibility of creating a new mode that shines the different characters in this master spotlight and doesn't show them really getting hurt too much by other masters and characters. That was one of the big reasons we decided to make World Tour for 6.

So, I guess we have Ed and that random social media user to thank for World Tour!
TN: Definitely. It's thanks to that one commenter on social media and because of that, I felt I didn't want there to just be one avenue to enjoy characters. People like characters for different reasons and we want to play with them in different ways. So, I want to give that freedom to the masses.

Speaking of Modern Controls, what have you noticed about how that control scheme is being used to bring more players into Street Fighter 6?
SM: I feel like there needs to be a reason to give to different types of players to get interested or to start playing again. We include Classic Controls for those who are returning players and those who've been playing fighting games like Street Fighter V, but we feel that Modern Controls was a powerful tool to get those who may have never played a fighting game to get interested and we're happy to see the reception of that. I've been playing Ranked matches in my hotel room and I've been noticing Modern Controls players who are my opponents; maybe 2 out of 10 of those matches are with Modern Controls. It's exciting to see this level of interest in Japan, where I think it's more like 5 out of 10 are Modern Controls players.

The three biggest fighting game franchises have all put out mainline entries that are well-liked. How do you look at the state of the fighting game genre?
TN: As fighting game fans ourselves, this is great that everyone is putting out new games and everyone's kind of thriving. One of the things we've noticed in terms of the fighting game industry is that everyone is trying to pack their game full of content, including ourselves!

SM: I'm very interested in how these companies are promoting all these new features. It's very insightful and interesting to see all that stuff. Overall, it's a great thing for the fighting game industry. But looking from our perspective, it's like, "Wow, I wonder how much all this costs to develop! Hopefully we all can make the return we need!" [Laughs] But in general, it's very exciting! ■

AI BRAIN DRAIN

As A.I. continues to become more prominent, independent developers ponder how to use it, whether they should use it, and the ethics surrounding it

BY WESLEY LEBLANC

I WOKE UP THIS MORNING and put on a white Hanes t-shirt mass-produced by a machine able to produce clothing at a rate no human ever could. But shirts like this used to be made by humans. While making coffee, I ask Siri on my iPhone what the weather will be like today and what my day's schedule looks like, and a few seconds later, an artificial intelligence-powered voice gives me the answers I'm looking for. After sitting down at my work computer to write this, I opened Spotify and checked out my Discover Weekly playlist, hyper-curated to my tastes based on the other music I've listened to over the past week.

On Instagram, my ads feel uncannily targeted to me, and on X (formerly Twitter), I see a new batch of posters for Amazon's upcoming *Fallout* streaming series called out for using A.I. None of this is possible without machine learning, which is what powers A.I. in other, more automated interactions some people use in their life and work, be it the chatbot ChatGPT, image creator Midjourney, or something else. But, as things like Siri, targeted ads, and curated playlists on Spotify settle A.I. into our lives in such a way we might not realize, there's a war brewing between humans and A.I. (and the people developing it and advocating for it) in the games industry.

"We've elevated as a species – we have the idea of creative art as personal expression," Brian Bucklew, co-creator of the popular sci-fi roguelike Caves of Qud, tells me. "Generative A.I. is extremely transgressive because it's not only displacing jobs, it's displacing humans from a space where we've decided, 'This is about personal expression.' We're looking at it and saying, 'Can [A.I.] be good art if there's fundamentally no expression underlying it?' Nobody has an answer to that. [A.I. in creative spaces like art] is totally new, and I don't think we've reckoned with that at all."

> "... Professionals on the team are adopting A.I. as something that empowers them [...] and that's something happening naturally."
>
> – JAVI GIMÉNEZ

↙ Caves of Qud uses Markov chains, a type of generative A.I., as a tool for statistical prediction

Opposite: Cataclismo

A.I. in Independent Spaces

Bucklew is one of the many independent developers – solo and within studios outside the triple-A publishing machine – I spoke to about A.I. and its use and effect on game development. Bucklew's Caves of Qud has been in development for more than 15 years. He says he's watched functions and jobs previously held by humans get replaced by automation and A.I. throughout his career. Even things he used to code by hand are now automated in game development engines like Unreal. He also says Caves of Qud is in a sub-genre that explicitly uses generative systems.

"These aren't [language learning models (LLMs)]; this is not Midjourney," he says when I ask if he uses A.I. in the game's development. "This is not some of the new attentional-based A.I. that is getting a lot of the press right now, but this is absolutely machine-based generative systems. So the answer is no if you're asking if we use LLMs to generate code, but the answer is yes, we use, for example, Markov chains [generative A.I. that uses current events to analyze the predictability and production of subsequent events] to generate books. And these really aren't that different except, again, in scope."

He says LLMs and Markov Chains are different but that both are statistical predictors; the latter is more primitive than the former, however. In either use case, he says good results come from hand authoring on top of the generative use of A.I. Javi Giménez, the CEO of Moonlighter and Cataclismo developer Digital Sun, agrees, noting there is no top-down mandate at the studio to use A.I. but that various developers there use it as a tool alongside their creative output.

"What has happened naturally is that some people at the studio – sometimes it's artists, sometimes it's programmers, sometimes it's designers – use some of the tools for specific tasks," Giménez tells me. "Some artists, for example, might be using it to create compositions based on images they already created to explore things fast. [What] I see is that professionals on the team are adopting A.I. as something that empowers them [...] and that's something happening naturally."

Guillaume Mezino, founder and developer at Kipwak Studio, which is working on a 3D wizard school sim called Wizdom Academy, says he first made the use of generative A.I. programs like Midjourney mandatory. Instead of using Google Images to search for references to creatures for players to encounter, developers at Kipwak used Midjourney.

“I said to all my team members, ‘Try to use it as best you can in every way you can and let’s see where we can go from that,” he says. “After a few days, it was the best decision ever. The artists saw it as a good ally to help them make decisions and open their minds to new possibilities.”

Of course, it’s important to note there’s an inherent relationship between Mezino, the studio's founder, and the employees there that might prevent said employees from saying otherwise. After all, he mandated A.I. to begin with. Would these developers want to use A.I. of their own volition? Anecdotally, within the wider games industry, I’d say no.

When I ask Mezino about A.I. replacing jobs at the studio now or in the future, he says most of the work A.I. does for Kipwak is work that a human would never have done. For example, he says Wizdom Academy features a lot of artwork. “If I had to pay humans, if I had to pay people to do 150-plus artworks, we would have never been able to do it,” he says. Instead, someone at the studio used A.I. to create those artworks. I ask if Wizdom Academy would exist without A.I. He says it would – just not as fast or as good. There’d be less art, fewer conversations (also powered by A.I.) to have with teachers at the school, and overall, “We would have gone for something way simpler, so less appealing, and I don’t think anyone wants that.” But that begets another question: Do people want the version of this game that uses A.I.?

Even though Giménez’s studio uses A.I. in its processes, he still feels there’s a legitimate concern about where A.I. gets its information from. He believes more substantial intellectual property and copyright legislation is necessary to protect human creatives. He doesn’t know the catch-all solution, though. Mezino says his team only gives A.I. work that people at the studio have created by hand.

“We are not comfortable with the idea of work being used to train A.I., work that was not paid for by companies,” Mezino says. “We do what we can and for us, it means we always have to give it what we do first – to give it our job, our work, and we ask it to do something with it, and we take it back and work on it again. That’s the best we can do.”

Mezino, like Giménez, wants to see stronger legislative protections placed on how A.I. is used to protect original artists.

A.I. and Ethics

Hilary Mason, machine learning expert and CEO of A.I. entertainment start-up Hidden Door, agrees. She wrote a book, *Data Driven*, with the Obama administration’s chief data scientist, DJ Patil. It centers on this topic and the questions and methods those interested in using A.I. should adopt to do so ethically.

She’s not immediately concerned with A.I., adopting the mindset that humans are still in control. But 20 years from now, she understands why communities are worried. “It’s not unreasonable to imagine a future in which you can describe a movie you want [...] and there wouldn’t be technical limitations in the way of it being created for you right there,” she says. “And it might actually be great. How do we, today, set up the foundation so that when we have that capability, we will value human energy and creativity?”

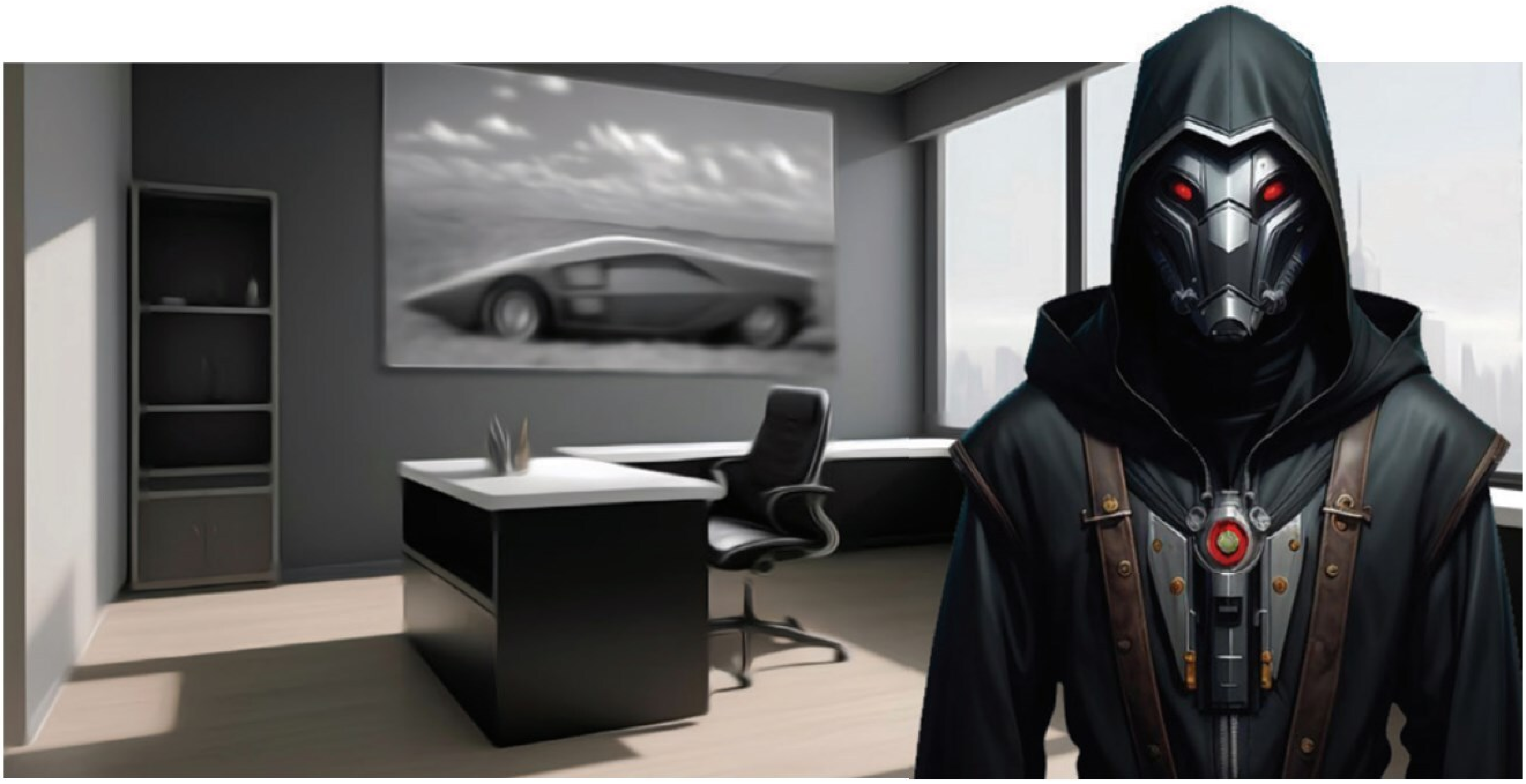
She says there are activists and communities big and small, loud and quiet, working to make this happen. But she also admits it’s impossible to know what A.I. and the surrounding conversation looks like 20 years from now. For her part, Hidden Door strictly licenses the properties and IPs it uses to bring A.I.-created D&D campaigns to users. Not ready to share specifics, Mason says Hidden Door is partnering with a number of fiction authors to make these campaigns happen. She envisions a world where someone could watch a new Star Wars movie and immediately go home and whip up a D&D campaign set within the movie’s world, laws, and physics using Hidden Door and its A.I. dungeon master. And it would do so ethically thanks to licensing agreements that ensure the right people get compensated and share Hidden Door’s revenue.

Of course, Star Wars might be a pie-in-the-sky property, but Mason is excited about some of the book authors already on board.

Hilary Mason, machine learning expert and CEO of Hidden Door, an A.I. entertainment startup, in a video for *Wired*

Opposite: Wizdom Academy

> “We are not comfortable with the idea of work [that was not paid for] being used to train A.I. […] We always have to give it what we do first – to give it our job, our work, and we ask it to do something with it, and we take it back and work on it again.”
>
> **- GUILLAUME MEZINO**



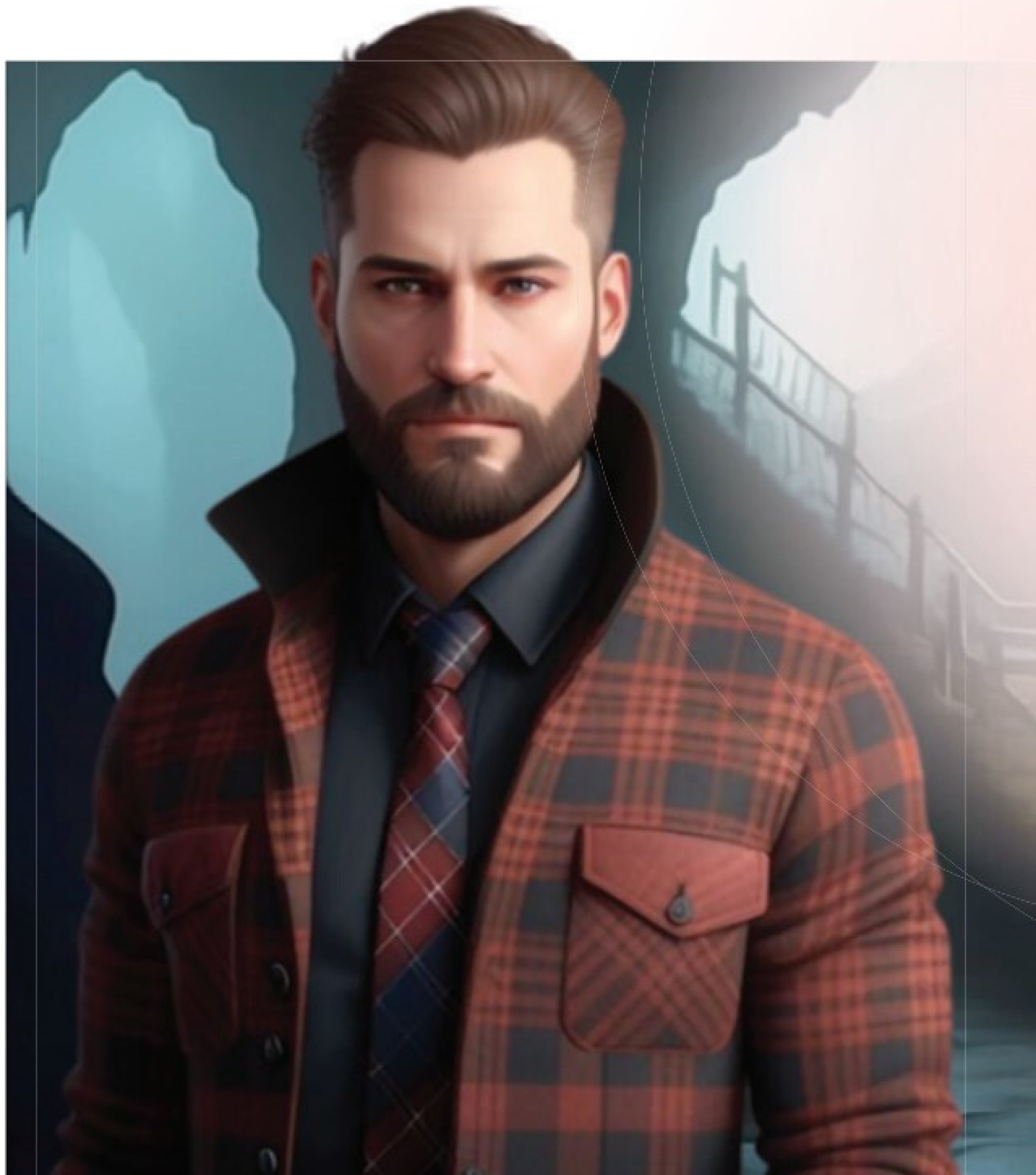
Bridging the Gap

For someone like Cameron Keywood, founder, director, and solo developer at DragonCog Interactive, A.I. was the only way to turn his vision of a game into something people can play, he says. "I have used it in development, but that was from a budgetary point of view because I'm a start-up studio, and artists, while they do good quality work, are quite expensive for the work I am doing, which is a visual novel," Keywood tells me of his upcoming sci-fi game, Baskerville, that reimagines 1902's *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. "I needed 30 backgrounds and 18 characters, and that would have cost a lot. For projects like that, I think it's okay."

Keywood says he questions where A.I. gets its learnings from, and while he appreciates that A.I. has allowed him to create a game he can't otherwise make, he'd prefer to hire an artist. But financially, it's not possible for him. He ponders using A.I. to create something like Baskerville that could earn enough money for a future project where he hires artists to create the art. Ultimately, he hopes A.I. remains the assist tool he feels it is today, but he could see it going a more disruptive route that ends with humans losing jobs.

Matt Wyble, COO of Marvel Snap developer Second Dinner, positions A.I. in a similar vein. "[A.I.] is unlocking our ability to make experiences that we couldn't have made before," he tells me via email. "It's not replacing team members but rather, empowering our small but mighty team to create like they never have before." Wyble's coworker and Second Dinner vice president of A.I., Data, and Security Xiaoyang Yang likens A.I. tools in the workplace to building a "mech suit" for developers.

"Imagine A.I. as this ally that can play Marvel Snap across countless scenarios, mimicking players of varying skill levels using decks of different archetypes," Yang writes to me via email. "Overnight, the A.I. tool analyzes all the games played and generates insights on game balance, spotlighting overpowered elements or underutilized strategies, which is invaluable for designers. With this new 'Mech Suit,' designers no longer had to release a game, knowing it might have balance issues, relying on player data post-launch to make adjustments, which often led to suboptimal player experiences. Now, designers in this mech suit can significantly reduce these instances by identifying and addressing balance issues even before the game hits the market.



↓
Baskerville solo developer Cameron Keywood used A.I. as an assist tool for background art in the visual novel

Opposite: Kohlrabi Starship solo developer Katja Wolff opted not to use A.I. art or audio

“It’s a protective, rather than reactive, approach to game balance, ensuring players get a more polished experience from day one.”

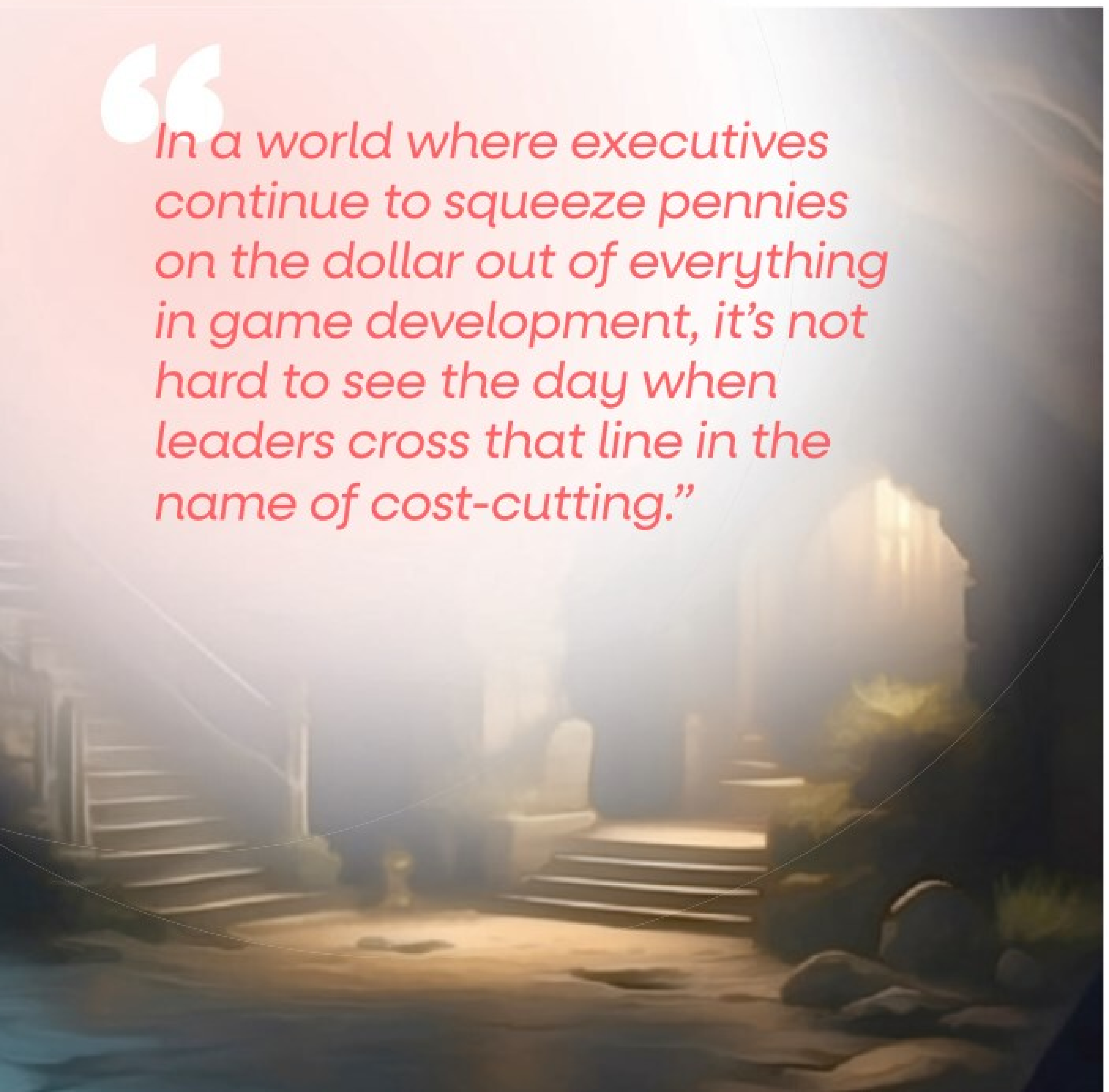
When asked how A.I. could disrupt creativity within game development, Yang says it’s crucial to remember that the human element is at the heart of every game. He posits that games without a human’s touch don’t have fantasy, achievement, emotion, storytelling, and connection.

“It’s like what [Apple co-founder Steve Jobs] said about computers being the bicycle of the human mind,” Yang says. “In today’s context, A.I. is the e-bike of human creativity in game development. It empowers designers to explore wild new ideas, pushing the boundaries of what’s possible in game design.”

Ultimately, he sees a future where progress in A.I. is not merely about leveraging technology for efficiency tasks like coding but also about embracing it as a tool and partner in the creative process. Of course, that line, the separation between a tool or partner and the loss of a job, grows thinner by the day. And in a world where executives continue to squeeze pennies on the dollar out of everything in game development, it’s not hard to see the day when leaders cross that line in the name of cost-cutting.

Solo developer Katja Wolff of WolKa Studio, which is developing sci-fi farming sim Kohlrabi Starship, has primarily opted not to use A.I., even if she understands why someone in a position similar to hers might.

“I tried a lot of A.I. tools, but in the end, I decided not to use it beyond sometimes brainstorming,” Wolff tells me. “So basically, it’s zero A.I. art, zero A.I. audio, but sometimes I use ChatGPT for brainstorming in the English language because it’s not my mother tongue.”



> “In a world where executives continue to squeeze pennies on the dollar out of everything in game development, it’s not hard to see the day when leaders cross that line in the name of cost-cutting.”

???

A new soul in this forsaken land? Who would have thought. Welcome!

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Day
11
Temperature 30
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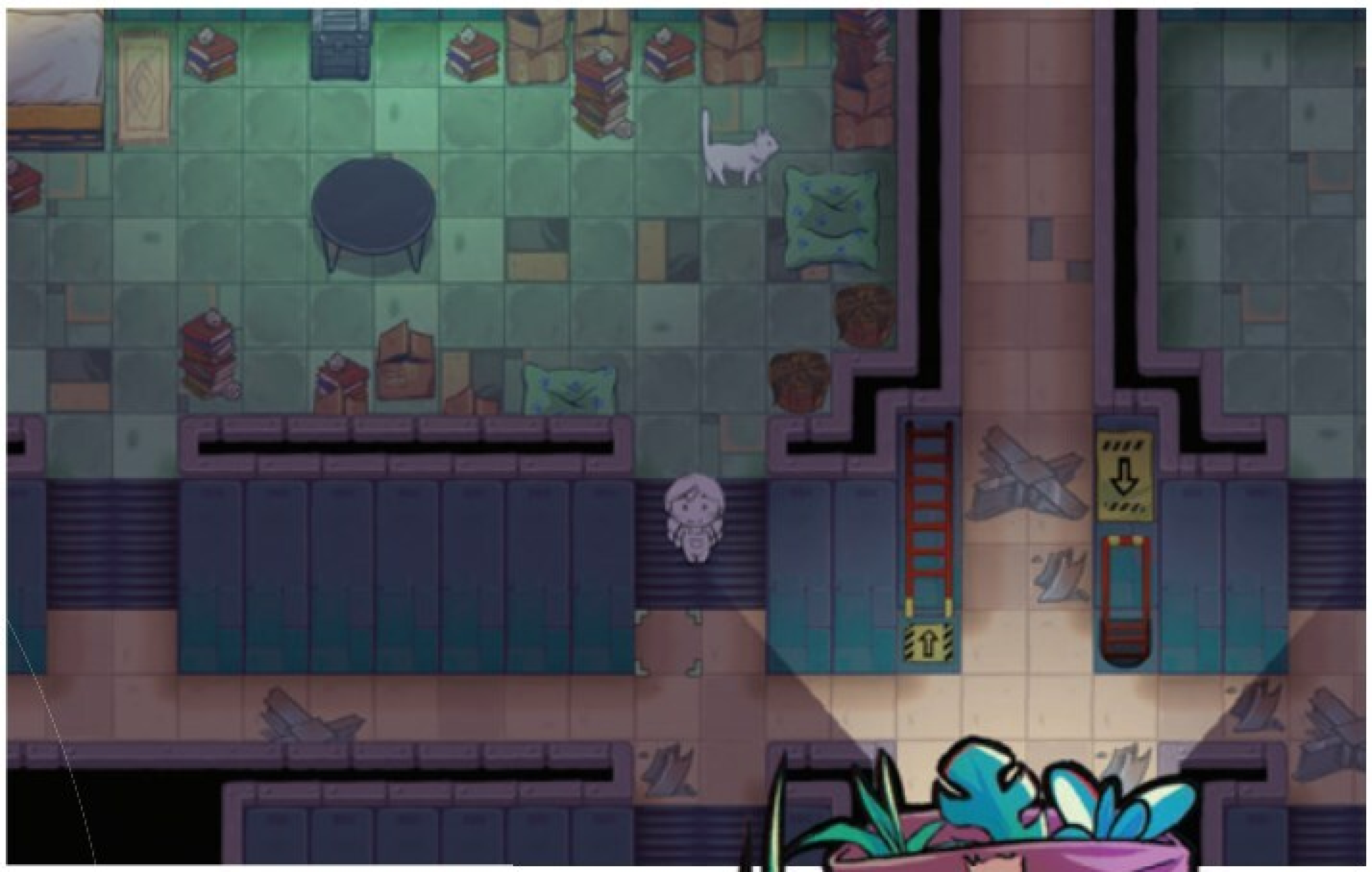
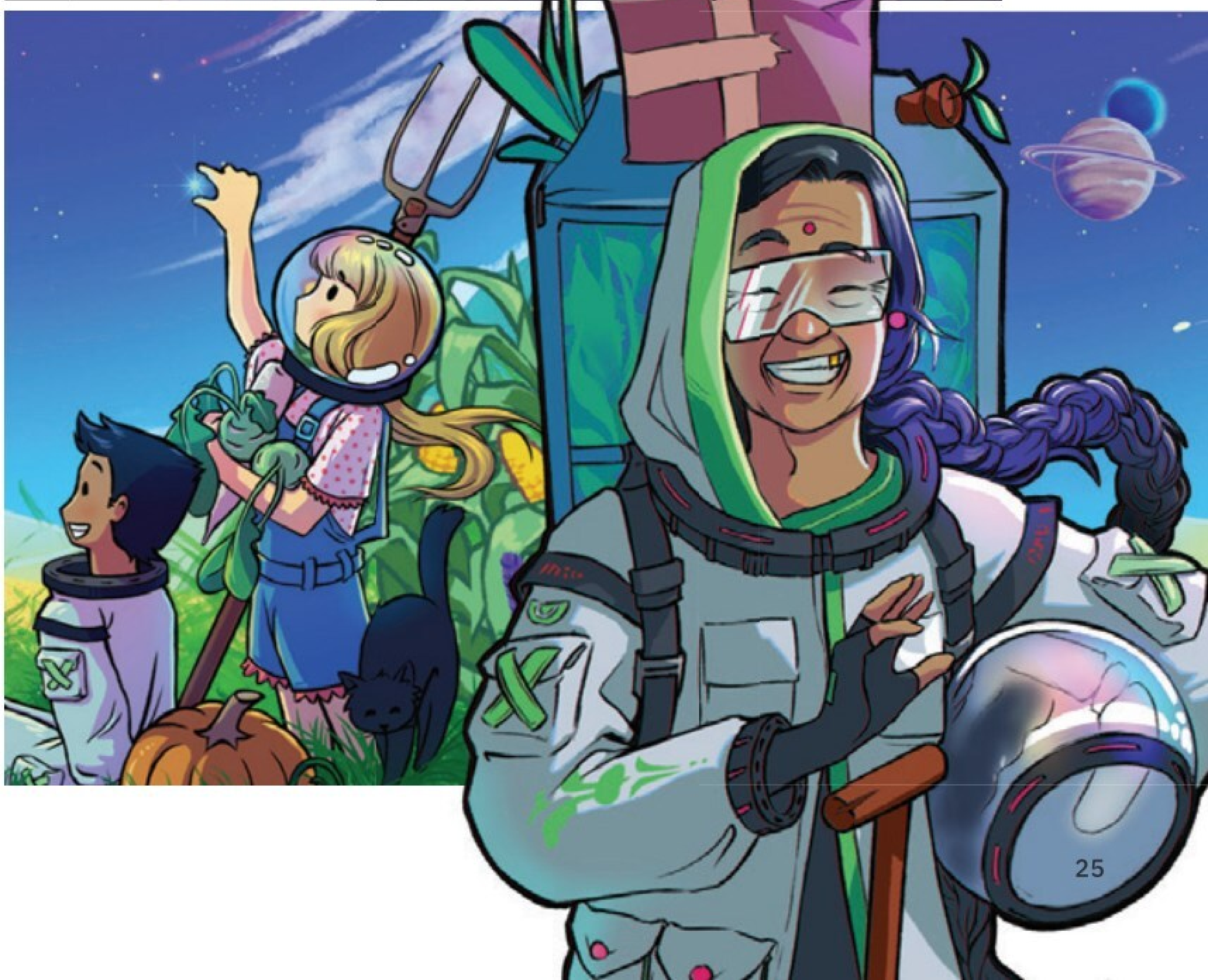




Caves of Qud

As for why ChatGPT is as far as she's gone with using A.I., she simply wasn't impressed with the options for A.I. art and audio development, noting that programs like Midjourney can't create the homogenized visual style one might want in their game. She thinks it's a matter of time before these programs catch up, though. And as A.I.-powered technology grows more competent, she hopes legislators will work harder to protect creatives. She likes Steam's approach: requiring developers to indicate A.I. usage on the game's page but only after the developer proves the game doesn't use copyright-protected data.

Like Wolff's use of ChatGPT, RoboSquad Revolution developer Zollpa utilizes the program to streamline the studio's organization. CEO Aaron Jacobson says Zollpa uses ChatGPT to organize notes after meetings, something that might take hours to do by hand but is done in minutes by A.I. "It's something that we probably would pay a secretary a full salary to do for us and [ChatGPT] is just able to do that, and in a very short period of time with just a few clicks of a button."

That's one secretary job lost to A.I. at Zollpa.

He says it uses ChatGPT to brainstorm new character classes, weapons, and names for the robotic characters in RoboSquad Revolution, which began as a blockchain idea that uses NFTs before sentiment around that technology soured (and funding money largely disappeared in that sector) and the team scrapped the idea. Jacobson says that technology might be integrated into the game one day.

Jacobson says Zollpa built RoboSquad Revolution narratively on the premise of A.I. Twenty years from now, A.I. robots have taken over and are "walking versions of Siri or something like that," that you control with third-person shooter gameplay. Jacobson says that despite using ChatGPT to brainstorm ideas that make their way into the game, "the development of the characters in the game is absolutely 100 percent created by humans," except for the voices; those are created by A.I., which Jacobson justifies narratively by explaining the robots in-game are powered by A.I.

Looking 20 years into the future of our real world, Zollpa marketing and brand specialist Richard Henne thinks the game development landscape will be a lot more competitive because of A.I.

"I imagine that bigger companies who are squeezing for over-the-top profits are going to try to use this for everything from character models to generative levels, which again is already happening, to voice – all that stuff, I'm sure is going to be attempted

Robosquad Revolution's robot characters are voiced by A.I.

> *To the extent that we allow capital to drive these systems, I don't think there's any route where all the labor that can be replaced by automated systems isn't replaced by automated systems. [... That's] obviously disastrous for the way society's stood up right now, where you should have a job and pay your bills with the money you earn."*
>
> **- BRIAN BUCKLEW**

to be fully replaced," Henne tells me during the same conversation he and Jacobson explain the robots in their game are voiced by A.I. "My hope is that companies do not fall for that. But if we're actually talking 20 years from now, I do think it's probably going to be a lot more of a competitive landscape, there will likely be layoffs, there will likely be protests and social movements, and I would be very surprised if this doesn't happen."

But like Mason, Giménez, and everyone else I speak to, Jacobson and Henne want to see stronger legislation created to help regulate A.I., a technology that, by all accounts of those I talk to, is one where Pandora's Box has been opened. Unfortunately or fortunately, it's here to stay, depending on where you fall in this conversation.

↘ Cataclismo developer Digital Sun does not mandate use of A.I., but various individual developers use it as a tool to bolster their output

The Problem on the Horizon

Bucklew feels the issue at the heart of the A.I. discourse, the rightful concern that people will lose jobs to the technology, strikes at a problem with society itself: We do not protect those affected. He says using copyrighted content to train A.I. models is unethical and should not be allowed – you should have to compensate users. "The other side of it, which is just using automated systems to replace human labor, that to me – whether or not that's ethical – we've decided as a society that's what we do, right?"

The shirt I put on this morning was once a product created by human hands until the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century turned it into a more automated process. People lost their jobs. But time advanced, and jobs were created around the new emerging markets, jobs that hopefully the jobless picked up. Bucklew says the same happened with car manufacturing, construction, and many other workforce sectors. With proper transition management, he thinks these massive changes in how society works can be smoother.

"I think we're in the middle of a [transition] now, and so it's extremely painful for a particular alignment of laborers who are visual artists, musicians, or voice actors," he adds. "And they don't have a job to go to, and we don't have any kind of safety net in society to say, 'Well, you're going to be fine. We're going to allow you to move to this new constellation of labor,' but nothing's going to stop this constellation of labor. [The] cynical business lines of force are going to force that new constellation of labor because everyone else will simply not be able to do business on a competitive level without it."

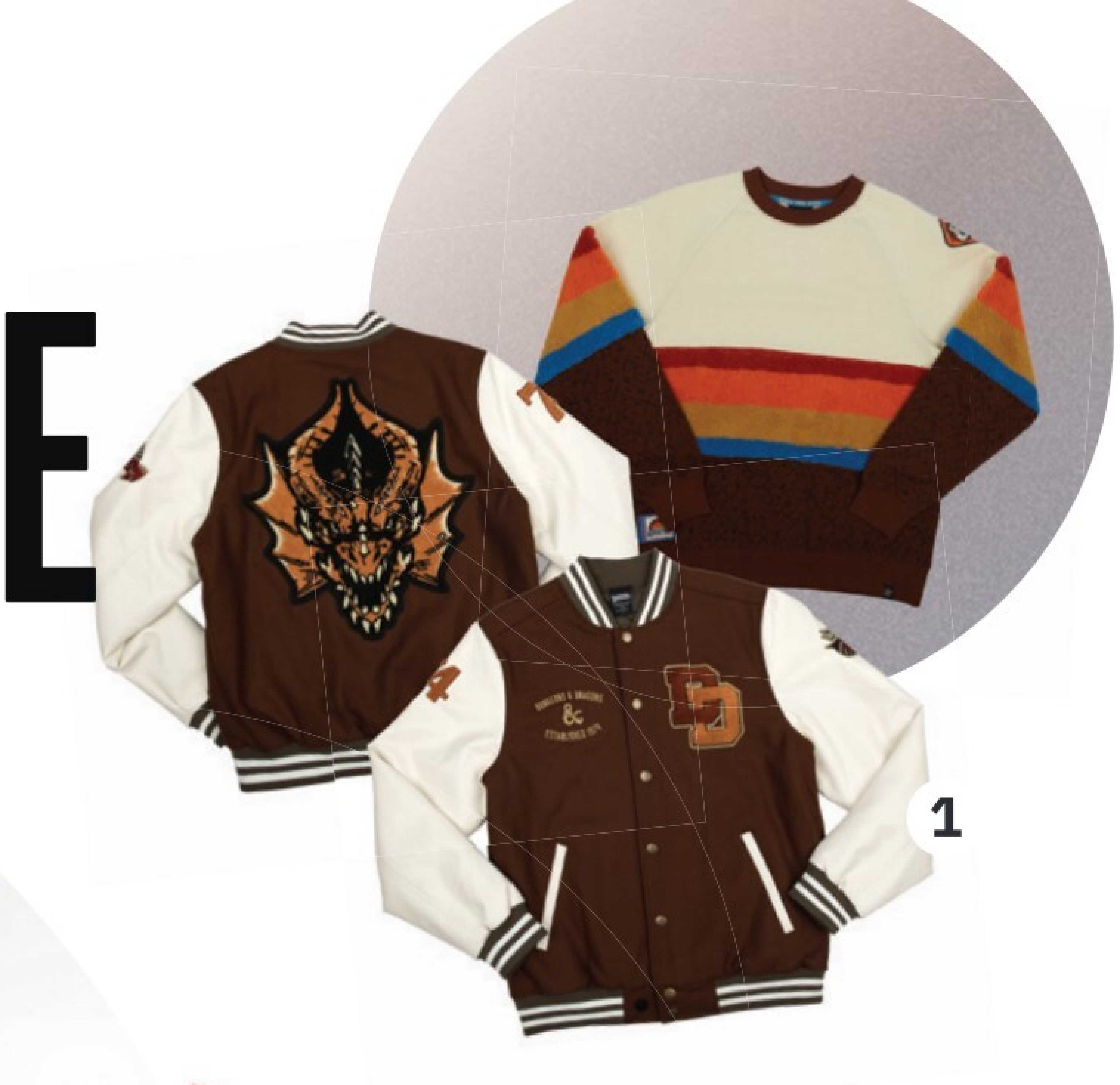
Cynically, Bucklew is not confident the cat can be put back into the bag, though. And he's not confident we're adequately prepared for the A.I. transition we're barreling toward. He ponders whether we should focus more on what happens afterward when people lose their jobs rather than what's happening today.

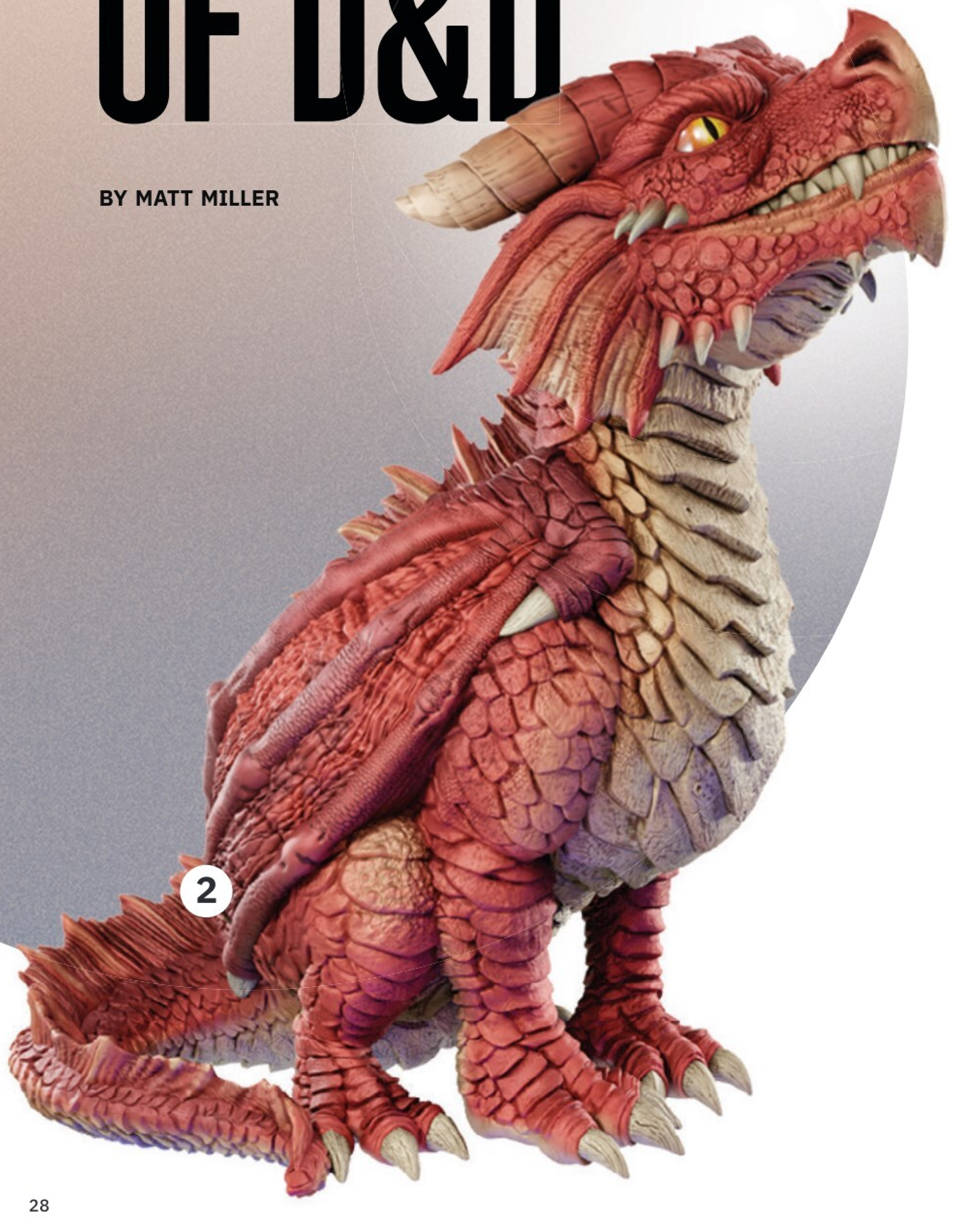
"To the extent that we allow capital to drive these systems, I don't think there's any route where all the labor that can be replaced by automated systems isn't replaced by automated systems, and the questions we're going to have to be asking in 5 or 10 years are ones that just seem bizarre to us," he says. "[That's] obviously disastrous for the way society's stood up right now, where you should have a job and pay your bills with the money you earn.

"I think that alignment is failing quickly and will fail more quickly than we can figure out how to get people into new jobs. And so, we have a real problem over the next 50 years as these systems continue to take off." ■

CELEBRATE 50 YEARS OF D&D

BY MATT MILLER





❶ HEROES & VILLAINS D&D APPAREL

For gamers looking for a more outward expression of their love of the game, it's hard to go wrong with the official apparel line at Heroes & Villains. Similar to its work on other properties like Marvel and Star Wars, the D&D clothing is stylish and fun and runs the gamut from overt branding to more subtle nods, depending on your pick. Consider the Red Dragon Varsity Jacket ($140) for the former and the colorful Roll The Dice Sherpa Crew Sweatshirt ($85) for the latter, but the whole line of D&D stuff on offer is worth a look.

Prices vary | *heroesvillains.com*

❷ RED DRAGON WYRMLING FIGURE

When people think of D&D, the iconic fire-breathing red dragon is often the picture that comes to mind, depicted at immense size diving down onto hapless adventurers. But even these memorable monsters have to start somewhere. This gorgeously rendered baby of the species is equal parts adorable and menacing. While it may be young, it's sure to be a centerpiece of any collection, standing nearly two-and-a-half feet tall. The display piece is made of a special lightweight foam, ensuring it's manageable and can move without trouble. Even at this large scale, the figure is hand-painted to reveal details on claws and teeth, color gradations in scales, and that irrepressible twinkle in its draconic eye. If you've spent an appreciable period of the last five decades at a table rolling 20-sided dice, this new companion is a worthy way to celebrate.

$650 | *shop.wizkids.com*

❸ THE YAWNING PORTAL BOARD GAME

If your gaming group is occasionally looking for a respite from the ongoing campaign (or the DM just hasn't had enough time to prep), having an option on hand to keep game night from being wholly derailed is nice. The breezy play loop of The Yawning Portal is a great fit, keeping players wrapped up in the D&D mindset but from a new perspective. Up to four players take on the role of tavern keepers at the famous in-fiction inn, preparing food and drinks for the unique tastes of the many stalwart adventurers who pass through the door. The competitive board game has just enough strategic depth to be a good time but won't take hours to explain before diving in – a perfect fit for that evening you're trying to fill.

$56 | *hasbropulse.com*

Dungeons & Dragons
The Yawning Portal
12+

3

❹ LORE & LEGENDS BOOK

For many players, the fifth edition of the game that launched in 2014 was either a first entry into D&D, or a reentry after years away, catapulting the role-playing experience into new levels of popularity. This extensive volume chronicles the design and relevance with ample insight from those who made the game through a visual guide format filled with illustrations, photos and exclusive material. The special edition includes three gatefold illustration pieces showing the evolution of creatures through the editions, a pull-out dice tray, a special resin d20, an 8x10 art print of the gorgeous Starter Set cover, and a map of Faerûn, the core setting that houses many of the game's most famous characters (as well as the recent Baldur's Gate 3 video game). If the bonuses aren't your thing, you can also track down a standard version of the complete book that costs around $80 less, but still features all the same depth and history of D&D.

$130 | *penguinrandomhouse.com*

❺ LEGO RED DRAGON'S TALE

A partnership between Lego and the Dungeons & Dragons brand seems like a foregone conclusion, and it's exciting to finally see the potential brought to life. This 3750-piece set includes a complete four-person adventuring party, iconic monsters like the beholder, displacer beast, an owlbear, and, of course, a rampaging dragon named Cinderhowl, who can even be displayed wrapped around the tower. Beneath, the chambers of an explorable dungeon invite discovery. As a bonus, Wizards of the Coast worked with Lego to craft an actual adventure that uses the figures and monsters of the set, so upon completion, your gaming group can make its way through the scene and story.

$360 | *lego.com*

Dungeons & Dragons
Lore & Legends
Lore & Legends

4

5

RETROSPECTIVE

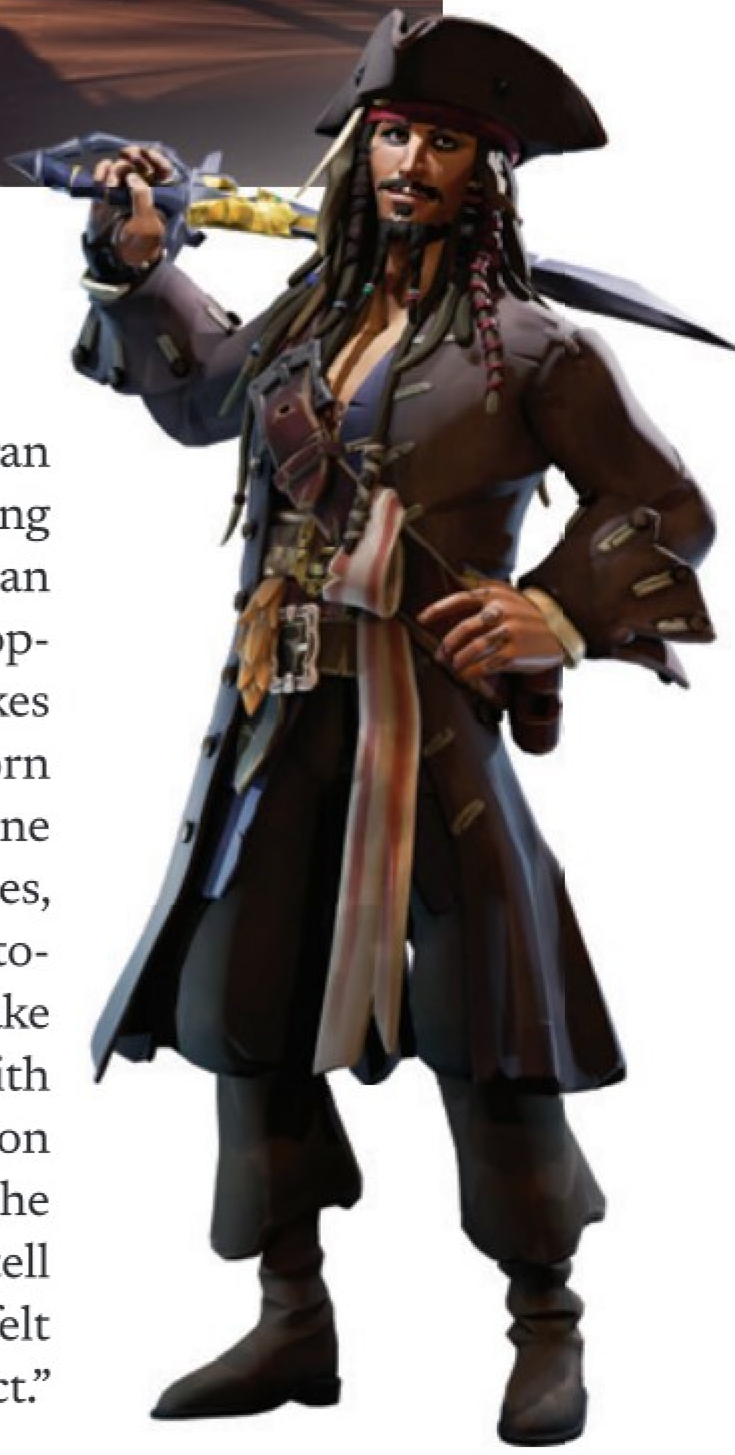
Life at Sea

As *Sea of Thieves* prepares to launch on PlayStation 5, we spoke with Rare about the game's continuing legacy

by Kyle Hilliard

WHEN IT LAUNCHED IN 2018, many players embraced the pirate life fantasy Sea of Thieves developer Rare had delivered, but many others were not sure what to do with the game. Sea of Thieves' critical reception was tepid. At the time, imprudent and foolish reviewers wrote things like, "The core mechanics of an innovative co-op journey can be found here, but the carrot being held out in front of your ship is unfortunately small and unappetizing," and, "Many elements of the experience left me wanting, even when it delivered on the pirate life." Since then, however, Rare and its Sea of Thieves team have pushed the game into a phenomenon with players of all ages taking to the seas to tell pirate stories together. "It's interesting to think that Sea of Thieves is the most popular – by any metric – game that Rare has ever released," creative director Mike Chapman says. It is especially impressive to consider when you look at Rare's history with games like Banjo-Kazooie and Goldeneye for Nintendo 64 and the Super Nintendo Donkey Kong Country games.

When I wrote those lines in my review five years ago, Sea of Thieves had not yet found its footing. There was work to be done, and like a crew of pirates motivated to discover treasure and make a better life for themselves, Chapman and the team worked hard to add to Sea of Thieves and bring it closer to the experience it had imagined from the beginning and what players wanted it to be. After finding and continuing success on Xbox platforms and PC, Microsoft made the surprise announcement that it was bringing the game to PlayStation 5 – Xbox's primary competition – for the next big step of its journey.



From The Beginning

"The kind of conception of [Sea of Thieves] began with, I think – like in most of Rare's history – looking at genres where Rare can make its mark," Chapman says. Rare looked at games like DayZ and Rust, popular online sandbox games at the time where stakes were high for survival, and much of the fun was born of how players cooperated or competed against one another in those worlds. "Before it was ever pirates, the core vision of the game was players creating stories together," Chapman says. Rare wanted to make a game where players could explore a fun world with versatile tools and boast high-quality production values on console, but were also conscious that the games that were skilled at allowing players to tell their own stories were often overly punishing. "It felt like a space where Rare could really have an impact."

All Images © Disney

From there, the discussion turned to thematic wrapping. Chapman says the team discussed ideas like whether the game could be about deep-sea exploration and even vampires. Internally, pirates were a favorite, which makes sense looking at Rare's history. It had never made a pirate-focused game before, but pirates did have a way of always sneaking their way in. "If it was pirates, it could be crews of real players sharing a ship. And then every other ship in that shared social sandbox will become another crew of real players," Chapman says.

At that point, the prototype stage began and Rare started exploring details like, should the game be first-person? If you're a pirate on your own, how do you control a whole ship? "We built the game outwards from there, starting with the absolute core, building a lot of the mechanics that you see today, and then obviously beyond," Chapman says.

Content Creators

Even with some unnamed reviewers being underwhelmed at launch, Rare felt strongly about the core mechanics and overall idea. "We were so confident in Sea of Thieves that I think the way we saw it is we launched a very pure experience," Chapman says. "And even in the run-up to launch, we were very open about how this was a game that was going to grow with its community – that it would evolve over time." Even with that stated promise for Rare, the launch was a lesson learned for the team. "What we didn't expect was the amount at which the lack of content really hurt us in those earlier days," Chapman says. "But that first year was very much around... we need to enrich the experience of the core experience we've already built."

It would be hyperbolic to call it a scramble, but after release, Rare had to rethink its plans for the game and change its approach for what it would add to the game – a pivot that paid off. Rare ripped up its planned roadmap for the year and shifted to focus on what players would perceive as core content. The Megalodon shark, for example, and other creatures were added along with one of the most unexpected additions: skeleton ships.

An early tenet for Sea of Thieves was that if you saw a ship in the distance, it would be other players. "We were set on this notion that every ship you see will be crewed by other real players," Chapman says. "Straight after launch, we reevaluated that, and we said, 'Well, you know, we actually want to have the presence of a sea-based threats and other ship-based threats when other players aren't around." In retrospect, it was a change Chapman and the team never thought they would make, but it was the correct decision.

One aspect Rare has never backed off on – despite annoying insistence from journalists like me at E3 2018 who badgered Chapman on why they weren't in the game – is RPG elements. You do not level up in Sea of Thieves in the traditional sense. Your sword never hits harder, and you will always have the same health no matter how much you play. That's by design, and considering the game's success and ability for any player to be on the same level as everyone else at any time, it's safe to argue that was the right call. "It's about doing the unexpected," Chapman says. "We wanted players to discover the game years after release. And what we didn't want was players to be

Pirate's License

Sea of Thieves has been dabbling with licensed properties from the beginning. Borderlands and Halo content is available for decorating ships, it worked with Disney to include Pirates of the Caribbean content, and most recently, Rare added Escape from Monkey Island characters and locations to the game. Does this new relationship with Sony mean we should expect to see references to PlayStation properties in the game? "No plans at the moment," Sea of Thieves creative director Mike Chapman says, "But it's absolutely possible."

Immersion is important to Rare (the Borderlands and Halo content is designed to seamlessly fit in the world), so if opportunities arise in the future, it would need to be relevant to the pirate fantasy. This raises the question of arguably the most popular pirate franchise in the world. "It would be really cool to do something with One Piece," Chapman says after complimenting the recent Netflix adaptation of the anime/manga. "We have no plans at the moment. But we'd certainly be open to that. If we did do it, we'd want to make sure it feels authentic."

left behind." The hindsight on the decision is all the stronger now as Rare, a Microsoft-owned developer, readies the game for a platform to which it never assumed it would be porting a game.

A New Station For Play

"If you'd asked me that question two years ago if I ever thought the game would come to PlayStation 5," Chapman says with a laugh, "I think you can probably imagine my response." Rare has been making video games since 1986. It has released games on nearly every Nintendo console, a few Sega consoles, Xbox consoles, and dabbled with plenty of arcade machines and PC releases, but somehow, it never crossed paths with Sony to release a PlayStation game until Sea of Thieves. "It feels so surreal," Chapman says.

Chapman doesn't have a specific answer when I ask who started the conversation about bringing the game to PlayStation. It wasn't necessarily explicitly directed by Rare, Microsoft, or Sony, but when it came time to pull the trigger, it was an easy decision. When the team met with Sony to start hammering down the details, they actually invited their liaisons to have their first meeting in Sea of Thieves on a ship in the game.

When I ask if anyone in the meeting appreciated the irony of Rare, roleplaying as pirates, inviting Sony onto their ship to presumably "infiltrate" their owner's primary competition, Chapman, expectedly, laughs off the comparison and offers a political answer about the newfound relationship: "It's probably been as painless as it possibly could be."

Rare is a skilled developer and familiar with porting its games to other platforms, so there seem to be few technical hurdles to bringing the game to PlayStation 5, but Chapman did talk about Sony's controller and what it could do with its added capabilities. Rare will take advantage of the haptics and adaptive triggers, but it has no plans to use the touchpad. "We've always been very intent about ensuring that one platform doesn't ever really have an advantage over another," Chapman says, pointing out that mouse and keyboard players have already been overlapping with controller players for years.

To The Future (Of The Historical Fiction)

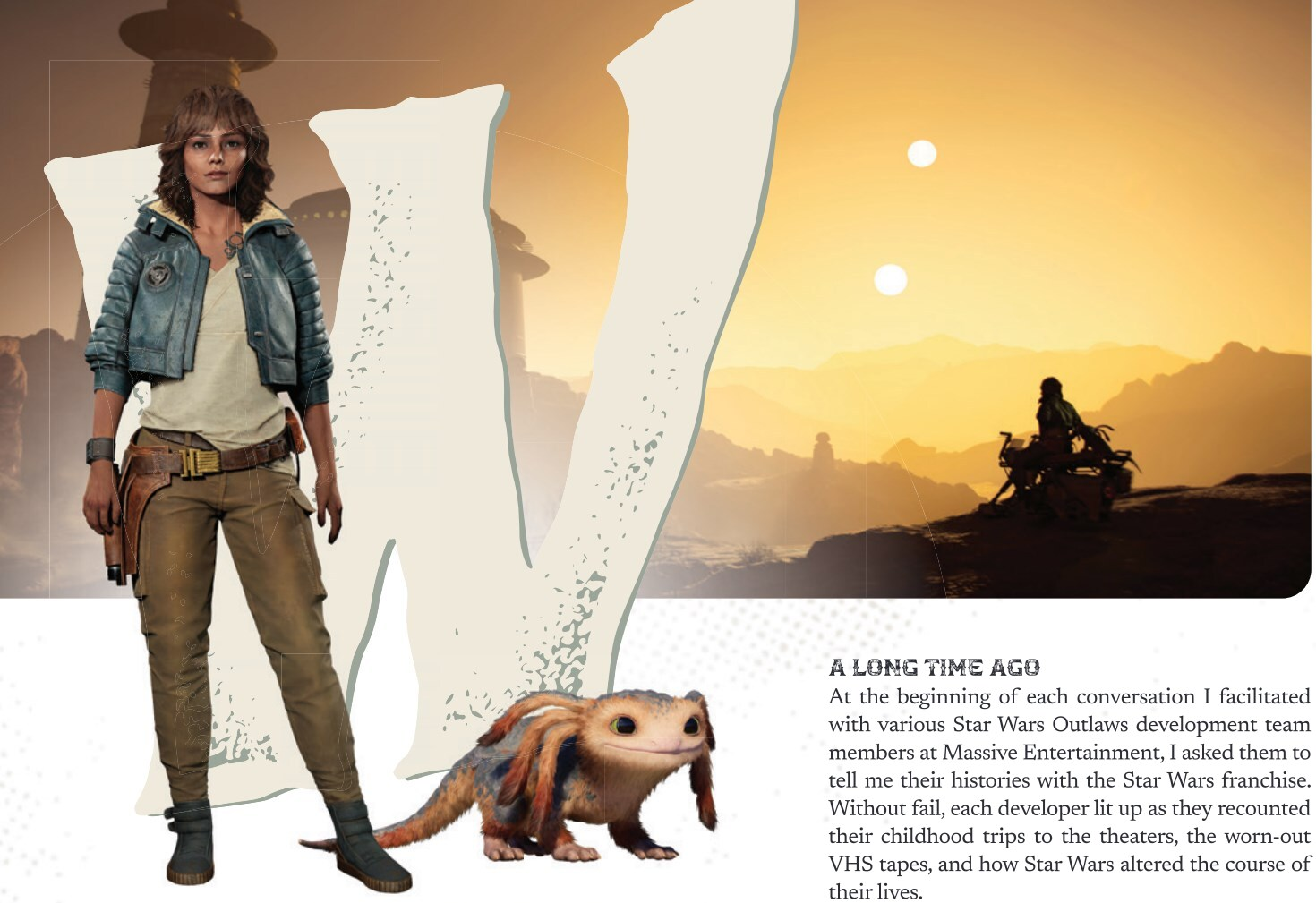
For me (an old man), I still think of Rare as the studio that made Donkey Kong Country and Perfect Dark. For Chapman and the playerbase it primarily engages with now, the developer is seen differently, but it's trying its best to retain the quality and innovation it has become known for. "There's probably a lot more people out there now that would recognize Sea of Thieves first before they recognize Rare as a studio," Chapman says. "This is who Rare is in the modern times." Sea of Thieves is now crucially important to the studio's ongoing sense – potentially the most important – but the future looks bright. "I hope it's timeless as just a wonderful depiction of the pirate theme and a great place to spend time with your friends," Chapman says. ■

All Images © Disney

FORGING A STRONG REPUTATION

HOW THE DEVELOPERS BEHIND THE DIVISION ARE HOPING TO DELIVER THE ULTIMATE SCOUNDREL FANTASY THROUGH STAR WARS OUTLAWS

BY BRIAN SHEA



When *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope* – then simply known as *Star Wars* – hit theaters in 1977, it changed cinema. The grand scale, eye-popping visuals, and relatable cast of characters made it an instant classic and established the IP as one of the biggest of its time. However, it was its sequel, 1980's *The Empire Strikes Back*, that demonstrated that not only was creator George Lucas' magnum opus more than a one-off fluke, but he had established a universe ripe for expansion.

Following the darkest chapter in the Original Trilogy, which is considered by many as the defining piece of Star Wars media and a classic film against which second chapters in stories are still compared to today, fans' imaginations ran wild with what could possibly happen next with Luke Skywalker and his underdog crew of rebels. In the one-year in-universe space between *The Empire Strikes Back* and 1983's *Return of the Jedi*, the galaxy is in a delicate state. The Galactic Empire is at the peak of its powers, and the Rebel Alliance is regrouping after a harrowing defeat. However, where some see a dire situation, others see opportunity.

It's in this period that Massive Entertainment, the developer behind The Division, The Division 2, and Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora, chose to make its scoundrel playground. We traveled to a galaxy far, far away – Malmö, Sweden – to be the first to play Star Wars Outlaws and speak with those creating this promising spacefaring adventure.

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Ubisoft **DEVELOPER** Massive Entertainment **RELEASE** August 30

A LONG TIME AGO

At the beginning of each conversation I facilitated with various Star Wars Outlaws development team members at Massive Entertainment, I asked them to tell me their histories with the Star Wars franchise. Without fail, each developer lit up as they recounted their childhood trips to the theaters, the worn-out VHS tapes, and how Star Wars altered the course of their lives.

"I think if you talk to most developers of a certain age, it's one of the first movies that we remember going to see at the cinema," creative director Julian Gerighty says. "I can remember going to the Odeon Theatre to see the movie, maybe in 1977 or early 1978, and my mind was blown. This was special effects of a level that we'd never seen before. And it was the whole spirit of exploration, mysticism, romance – it was all these things packed into one experience.

And remember, this is hard for us to remember these days, but there was no Netflix, there was no video on demand, so this was ultra rare. It lived in your memories, your experience of seeing it, and then it was my first VHS; it was the VHS that I watched the most. It was the foundation movie of my youth."

Each developer I spoke with has a similar story to share with a level of passion that spells authenticity. While it's not a surprise for people born in the '70s, '80s, and '90s to be fans of Star Wars, what is refreshing is to speak to developers about working on a licensed product and when they say it's a "dream come true," I can see in their eyes and hear in their voices that these aren't just empty platitudes and PR-fed lines. Gerighty even calls the franchise "foundational in our cultural upbringing."

With that baked-in love for Star Wars, the developers fondly remember when Ubisoft leadership came to them to offer the opportunity to work on an all-original Star Wars adventure. Following development on The Division 2, Massive Entertainment's former managing director David Polfeldt had been in discussions with Disney about working together on one of its properties. According to Gerighty, during those discussions, Polfeldt brought up the studio's passion for Star Wars, which served as a way to get the ball rolling.

With seemingly limitless options for the direction the studio could take its adventure, Gerighty and his team looked at the archetypes available in the Star Wars tabletop role-playing games, including Jedi, spies, operatives, and more. Massive wanted to craft an adventure built around a unique perspective: one that speaks to a different set of characters and navigates the galaxy in a different way. The archetype that stuck out to the developers was the scoundrel. Plenty of developers have explored the Jedi and Rebel experiences, but scoundrel tales are far less prominent.

"We felt that one of the venues in Star Wars that, especially recently, hasn't been explored as much is that of the scoundrel character," associate narrative director John Björling says. "A relatable character, a rookie kind of taking their first steps into the galaxy, exploring the world, and really getting involved with the people and factions that make up the fabric of the galaxy. That was something that we knew very early on that we wanted to pursue: to have that personal story and really make the galaxy come to life."

In the Star Wars galaxy, the scoundrel is personified by Han Solo, but even though Massive and Lucasfilm decided early on to establish this new game in the Original Trilogy, Massive didn't want to merely retread that ground by making a Han Solo game. "Not once did that come up," Gerighty says. "We wanted to tell different stories with different main actors, as well."

Once Massive set its sights on a scoundrel adventure set in the period between *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi*, it began taking stock of its strengths and areas where it "wanted to exercise muscles [it] didn't necessarily exercise on previous games," according to Gerighty. The title was established as a single-player action/adventure game within an open world. However, if the player chooses, they can jump into a ship and fly out into space to participate in battles and jump to other planets.

But that's just part of the scoundrel fantasy Massive wanted to shoot for. Star Wars Outlaw's main character, Kay Vess, starts as a thief before growing into a gunslinger. Massive wanted to portray more of a "resourceful underdog" approach instead of the trained soldiers that star in The Division.

HONORING THE CLASSICS

The positioning of Star Wars Outlaws during the Original Trilogy after the Rebellion's darkest hour defines so much of the game. The Imperial presence, the flourishing crime syndicates, and the iconic locales in familiar states all play into Kay Vess' experience within the game.

"In our first meeting with Lucasfilm, this was one of the key topics that we really wanted to solve: Where do we put the game?" associate narrative director John Björling says. "We agreed that really the perfect fit for this type of game and for this story is the Original Trilogy."

But before Massive Entertainment could reap the benefits of the most classic Star Wars trilogy, it needed to ensure it remained authentic to the films. The team examined the cinematic roots of the Star Wars franchise, down to its inspirations, including Akira Kurosawa, Westerns, and old war movies.

"It should feel like a classic matinee adventure," Björling says. "Gripping conflicts and challenges wrapped in explosive action, adventure, and suspense. But it's also a space opera. You have to have that emotional tension, that character-driven drama."

The lighthearted, approachable angle of Star Wars is accentuated by the designs and concepts of designer Ralph McQuarrie, who worked closely with George Lucas on the art direction of the Original Trilogy, including characters like Darth Vader, Chewbacca, and various droids.

Massive worked alongside Lucasfilm to honor that initial vision set forth by McQuarrie when designing new elements for Star Wars Outlaws by adhering to three rules: strong silhouettes, the Three Second Rule (regarding how long it takes a viewer to understand what they're seeing), and injecting or maintaining the personality of characters, locales, vehicles, and so on. But the studio didn't stop there, as the team even studied things like the camera lenses used to shoot the first Star Wars film.

"We want the game to be like a realistic rendering style with the filmic treatment, the color grading materials, and the camera effects to ensure this authentic experience that we know from the original movies," art and world director Benedikt Podlesnigg says.

From what I've seen, the result is an experience that is definitively Star Wars Original Trilogy but presented in the modern era with all the conveniences of modern game-development technology, like improved visual fidelity and frame rates.

"A scrappy underdog is going to use every trick in the book to get out of a tricky situation," Gerighty says. "Sometimes, a scoundrel should avoid getting into combat, so stealth became incredibly important for us as well, and having the choice of going in with your guns or sneaking around, that needs to be at the heart of every single encounter that we create."

As Kay, players take on jobs from various crime syndicates as they navigate the underworld of the Star Wars galaxy during this precarious period. However, things are never so black and white when dealing with the Hutt Cartel, the Pyke Syndicate, and other established syndicates across various planets. Kay needs to make difficult decisions about how she approaches each job.

That gets to the heart of what Massive Entertainment calls the "ultimate scoundrel fantasy." Massive wanted the notion that actions have consequences, and your reputation follows you wherever you go to permeate the entire experience, giving birth to a robust Reputation System that feeds into nearly every part of Star Wars Outlaws.

With the foundation and premise of the title established, Massive Entertainment shot for the stars as they got to work creating a scoundrel experience for the ages. And while some may choke on ambitions as lofty as the ones set forth for this project, Massive feels it has risen to the occasion and is on track to deliver a full-spectrum scoundrel experience within the fertile Star Wars galaxy.

A HIVE OF SCUM AND VILLAINY

One of Massive's guiding principles for Outlaws is that someone existing in the Star Wars underworld inevitably lives and dies by their reputation, a notion I felt throughout my hands-on demo with Star Wars Outlaws. Following an unfortunate turn of events, Kay lands on Toshara, an all-new moon created by Massive in collaboration with Lucasfilm Games.

"It was a process that taught us that no matter how much you think you know about Star Wars, you don't know enough about Star Wars," Gerighty says with a smile. "There is a beauty and a simplicity in terms of the design of every single one of those locations that we've learned a lot from. It has to be familiar. It has to be something that you could almost recognize on Earth, but there's always a twist. And in the case of Toshara, it's these huge streaks of amberine, an amber-like material that's translucent that forms part of the landscape, but it's also within the cities."

The picturesque landscapes and beautiful plains inspired by the African savanna may distract you from the corruption the moon faces for a moment, but the discerning eye will immediately notice signs that not all is well on Toshara. Corrupt politicians, Imperial occupiers, and, most pertinent to Kay, multiple crime syndicates all have a home on the moon.

This state is one of the primary reasons Massive chose this era in the Star Wars canon to craft its adventure. "This is the time where the underworld thrives," game director Mathias Karlson says. "That is fundamentally the world which Kay moves in, and a large part of the game and its story will be about Kay's journey deeper and deeper into this underworld, navigating its different threats and opportunities."

Nowhere is this more evident than in Toshara's capital city, Mirogana. It's here that my time with Star Wars Outlaws begins. Mirogana is multi-leveled and dense, with diversions from your main mission aplenty. "If you open up the map, the location that we've built for Mirogana is quite compact," Gerighty says. "What we wanted to do is to have something that is very dense in activities rather than super expansive where you get lost, and there's not much to do. It's very, very focused on providing a dense, busy city experience."

After flashing a fake identification to a Stormtrooper, I progress to my destination. This moment is a stark reminder of the state of the galaxy. I ignore the beckoning shopkeeps, arcade games, betting areas, and the table hosting the in-universe card game Sabacc to navigate to the cantina. In each city you visit, whether on Tatooine, Akiva, or Kijimi, the cantina is always a central location for gathering intel, getting the lay of the land, and finding work. Toshara – and Mirogana, in particular – is primarily a Pyke enclave despite being home to other syndicates too, so Kay needs to meet with Gorak, the leader of the Pyke Syndicate. Unfortunately, he's locked away in the VIP section, and I need to find a way in, so it's time to look for a backdoor. Using Kay's hairpin – which is actually a dataspike – I hack into a back room by doing a simple rhythm-based lockpick minigame.

After entering the backroom of the cantina, I see a blue icon in the distance, which means Kay can send her companion, Nix, to fetch it. Nix is a merqaal, a new species designed in collaboration with Lucasfilm Games. Nix is far more than just a helper, though. Nix is as close to a part of Kay as a separate creature can be.

Massive describes Kay and Nix in terms of "1+1=3" because they are greater than the sum of their parts. "I always say, 'Kay's not a Solo, Kay's a duo,'" associate art director Marthe Jonkers says with a chuckle after I ask if Kay's relationship with Nix is similar to Han Solo and Chewbacca. "We have Kay as the main character, but it's actually Kay and Nix. They are the main character. We really wanted to bring this unique duo as the main character to the Star Wars galaxy. They work together a lot, and Nix helps you, but he's really her buddy. [...] That relationship and having this duo is what makes Kay a unique character, like a unique scoundrel. She's not on her own. She's not doing this all by herself. She actually has her partner in crime. That brings a unique take on the scoundrel archetype."

Nix helps Kay find novel solutions to problems, like distracting enemies. As I play through my demo, it takes a while to remember to use Nix, but once I do, I immediately understand the benefits of his utility (more on that later).

Kay reaches Gorak's suite, and after making a joke that lands with a thud and name-dropping the wrong person, she is tossed out. As she dusts herself off, Nix reveals that he stole Gorak's ring during the scuffle. A voice tells her that might not be the best decision given the Pyke's power.

The voice comes from Danka, a Mirogana broker. After giving you a rundown of the syndicates operating on Toshara, she gives Kay a job from an unknown client: steal a file from a Pyke stronghold. And with that, one of Star Wars Outlaw's defining elements emerges: the Reputation System.

YOU LIKE ME BECAUSE I'M A SCOUNDREL

Kay Vess enters the Star Wars Outlaws story as an unassuming thief from Canto Bight, a city most known for the casino scene in *Star Wars: Episode VIII – The Last Jedi*. But she didn't come from the extravagant portion of the town; instead, Kay grew up in the workers' district, where she started as a common pickpocket before graduating into a full-on thief.

"We put a lot of care into her design and what she's wearing and how she looks to tell her story," associate art director Marthe Jonkers says. "She has a lot of elements in her design that tell a bit of her story. For example, she has a broken nose. She's been through a lot; you can see that she has scars and stuff. She also has a hairpin; I love that element because she uses that to lockpick doors, and you can use that from the beginning to do some thieving."

She dreams of pulling off the ultimate heist, allowing her to attain her primary goal for her and her companion Nix: freedom. However, after a job goes sideways, Kay finds herself with a massive bounty on her head and a target on her back, which is where we pick up with her at the beginning of Star Wars Outlaws.

"I think it's very relatable as a human being on planet Earth that this character doesn't have any magical powers or properties beyond her daring, her wits, her skills, her tools, and her buddy Nix," game director Mathias Karlson says. "The personality type is also perfectly suited for going on a swashbuckling adventure. I think that's something I really resonated with thinking about this character in terms of building a game and gameplay around it."

Kay and Nix are later joined by a droid veteran of the Clone Wars named ND-5 as they navigate the criminal underworld together.

MAKING A NAME FOR YOURSELF

In Star Wars Outlaws, Kay must navigate the criminal underworld through four syndicates, each with its own leader. Jabba the Hutt, leader of the Hutt Cartel, stands out as the most recognizable underworld boss Kay crosses paths with, but she'll also deal with Lady Qi'ra (who many know from Emilia Clarke's portrayal in *Solo: A Star Wars Story*) of Crimson Dawn, Queen Ashiga of the Ashiga Clan (a new syndicate created for Outlaws), and Gorak of the Pyke Syndicate.

The Reputation System in Star Wars Outlaws represents your relationship with these four syndicates. Your reputation, which ranges from Terrible to Excellent for each group, determines how that criminal organization treats you. Having a good reputation with a syndicate may mean they let you walk freely in their hideouts, offer you special stock or discounts at the shops in their territories, and even help you if you get into a hairy situation with another syndicate or even the Empire.

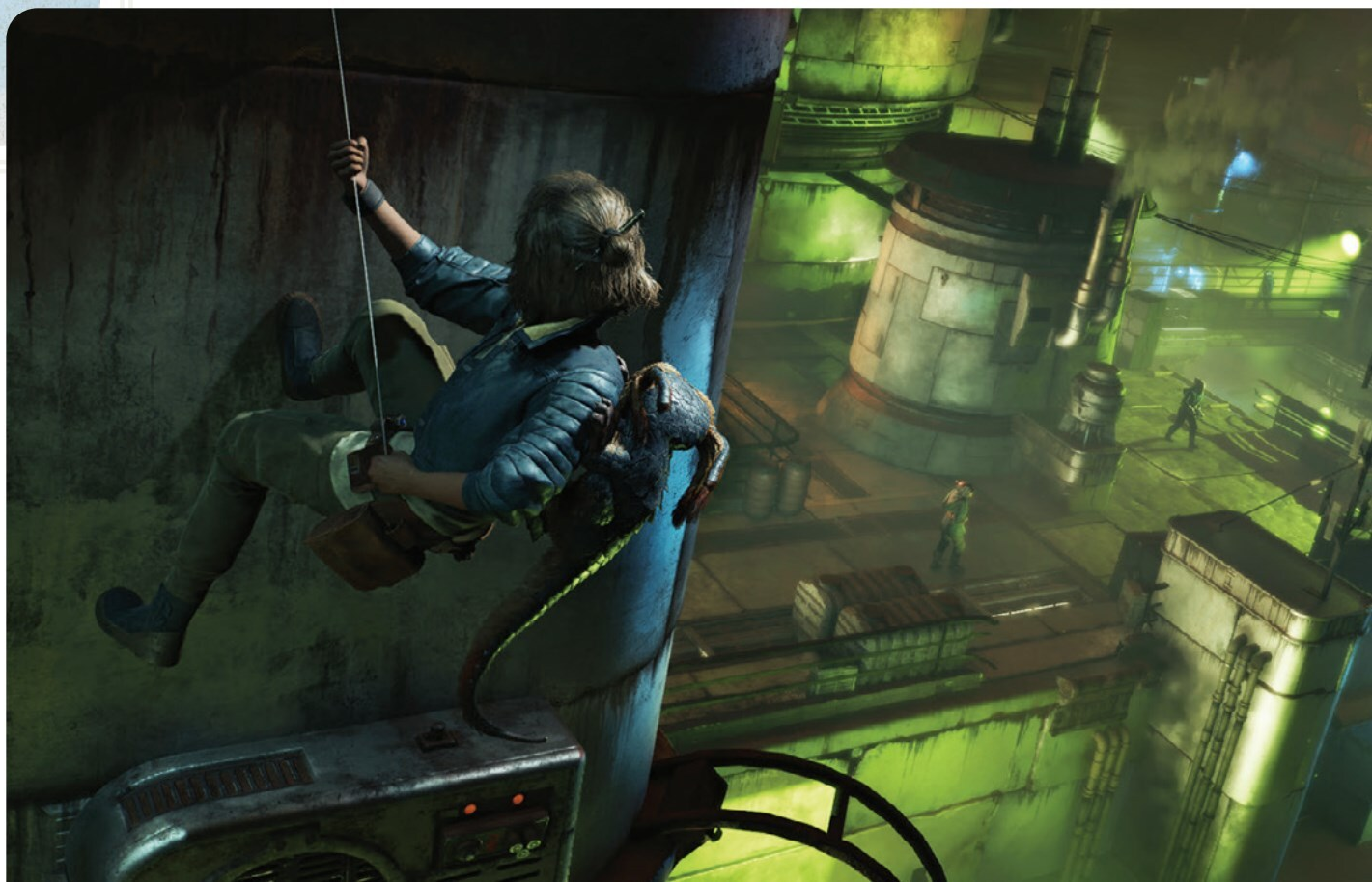
In the case of my playthrough, my introduction to manipulating Kay's reputation starts with this simple mission of infiltrating the Pyke territory of Mirogana and stealing a file for a mysterious client. I guide Kay to the Pyke territory, but the fact that she recently met with their leader hardly leads to a red-carpet rollout from the guards stationed at the front gate.

"If you have a bad reputation with the syndicates, they won't let you in," lead systems designer Matthieu Delisle says. "You can sneak in, but if you get caught, you will be kicked out. However, if you have a good reputation once you've worked good rep with the Pyke Syndicate, for example, you'll be able to freely go in and then you can get access to a bunch of opportunities. That can be things like jobs for the syndicates, merchants with some of the better stuff for sale, intel, rumors, and can also be high-stakes Sabacc tables. The syndicates are hubs of opportunities that you get access to with the right rep."

Since my standing with the Pykes is firmly in the "Poor" section of the Reputation meter, I can't just walk right in; I'll need to sneak. After finding a back way in, which involves looping around, heading down a back alley, and climbing up a ledge, I emerge in a restricted Pyke area. Star Wars Outlaws strives to provide player agency to those in control of Kay, but in these early portions where you must break in, you need to be stealthy. As such, you can't use your blaster in these sections. However, you can perform stealthy takedowns of guards to make the path to your destination easier.

These moments are when Nix really comes into play. As Kay crouches behind a box, a Pyke guard approaches my position. From the shadows, Kay instructs Nix to hassle the guard. He can do the subtle approach of acting cute in front of the guard while Kay sneaks around to take them out, or Nix can do what I ultimately chose in this situation: climb up the guard's legs and jump on their head. It's louder, but that can play to your advantage of running up and taking them out without the need for finesse.

After sneaking past a couple of guards and taking out some others, I find a backroom with a locked door. Once Kay picks the lock, she finds herself in what appears to be a maintenance room. Using another of Nix's abilities – his senses – Kay identifies electrical circuits in the walls, which tell you which buttons to press to call the elevator needed to reach the next area. Unfortunately, the first elevator doesn't raise high enough, and the second elevator's button is out of reach for Kay – but not for Nix.



By directing Nix to press the button, Kay successfully lowers the second elevator to a position where she can climb onto a grated wall to reach the ledge. Continuing into the ventilation shafts, a whirling fan impedes Kay's path, but by telling Nix to pull down a shutter, Kay can blast the power supply and get past the fan.

After using Kay's grapple hook to swing across a gap, I reach the area with the file. Unfortunately, it has an energy shield with two generators. Even worse, the area is heavily guarded. There is some good news: Since I've entered a contained, hostile area, I can use Kay's blaster if it comes to that. But it also means if I get caught, it won't just result in getting kicked out; the enemies in this area shoot to kill.

I decide to start with a stealthy approach. Using Kay's binoculars, I mark enemies to keep track of them once I descend to the floor. I take down a few of them thanks to a combination of my cunning, Nix's assistance, and the "stun" setting on Kay's blaster, but it doesn't take long for the guards to spot me and a shootout begins. Sadly, I did not think to disable the alarm system, so it's triggered. Even if I had taken down the alarm system, it wouldn't have made a difference, as I accidentally walk past the sightline of a security camera.

The firefight goes on for a long time. As I take out Pykes, stronger enemy types with shields and more advanced weaponry arrive. Thankfully, I have healing items I can use, and the fallen enemies drop better weapons than Kay's blaster that she can use until they run out of ammo. Since I've triggered this alarm, my reputation with the Pykes drops; had I made it through without being spotted, my reputation with them wouldn't have taken a hit.

That's not the world I live in, though, as the bodies are piling up. At the risk of doing something rash, I make a break for it. In breaking the line of sight with the guards, a blue silhouette shows my last-known location; that's the first place the guards will look before fanning out to try and find me. I use this temporary de-escalation to make a break for the generators. After stealthily taking down the guards stationed by them, I deactivate both generators and go to retrieve what I came for. After grabbing the file from the terminal, Kay stumbles upon something juicier: footage of one of Gorak's underlings plotting against him. Ever the opportunist, Kay knows that someone would pay a pretty penny for this info – maybe even Gorak himself.

TAKING FLIGHT

When on the surface of a planet or moon, Kay Vess can traverse by foot or speeder. However, once she decides to go off-world, the Star Wars Outlaws protagonist can navigate the stars using her trusty ship, the *Trailblazer*.

Though I didn't get the chance to play any space sequences, the open-world philosophy of Star Wars Outlaws extends to the orbit of these planets and moons. "You have space combat, space exploration, sense of travel, sense of movement," creative director Julian Gerighty says. "The combat can be very intimate dogfights, but it also can be large, epic set pieces."

Planets and moons have a buffer zone around them, allowing for real-time space flight, with the edges of these areas serving as jump points for hyperspace. "For planets, we wanted to have an orbit around them with lots of different points of interest, things to do, battles to get in, places to explore," Gerighty says. "The orbits for each one of the moons or planets that we created had to be populated with lots of different things, and we didn't want to create endless space, so you hyperdrive from the orbit of a planet to the orbit of another planet."

Once in that orbit, you can take part in those combat scenarios, but you can also take on quests. In one case, as described by art and world director Benedikt Podlesnigg, he was completing other tasks in space. He received an emergency signal that a helpless freighter was under attack by pirates. After fending them off, he landed on a nearby space station. While he can't go too deep into these space stations or their scale, he confirms they can have vendors and quest-givers.

That's right. Even after the violence I just took part in with the Pykes – my face on camera and everything – Kay still considered going to their leader. That's because there's somewhat of an understanding from all viewpoints that these relationships aren't about making friends. They're about mutual benefit.

"The way that people in the world react to Kay will vary depending on the reputation, but it is very transactional," senior systems designer Alice Rendell says. "These aren't friendships, so it's still very, 'Okay, can Kay help you out in that moment?'"

I return to the cantina with the file for the client. It turns out that the anonymous client was a member of Crimson Dawn, and this file retrieval was a test to see if that syndicate could rely on Kay for more important jobs. With a foot freshly in the door, Kay thinks fast, wondering if she should give the extra file regarding the Pyke Syndicate coup to Crimson Dawn instead. At this moment, the player has a choice: do you provide it to the Pyke Syndicate as initially planned or your new associates in Crimson Dawn? I opt to give it to Crimson Dawn, causing my reputation with them to increase. To thank me, they give me fuel injectors for my ship.

"It's really about choosing whichever syndicate benefits her in the moment," Rendell says. "It's really up to the player to decide how they want to balance their reputations throughout the game. You can go all in with one syndicate, but obviously at the risk of displeasing others, or you can try and play the underworld a bit more and try to find something a bit more balanced."

After taking on an optional job with another quest giver in the cantina, I return to Danka for more work. She tells me to go to a particular merchant to retrieve a part needed for Kay's blaster. Sadly, when I arrive, I learn he doesn't have it, but I can probably steal the part from a nearby syndicate. The question is, do I steal it from the Pyke Syndicate or Crimson Dawn? Both of them have a presence in Mirogana, but since I have a better reputation with Crimson Dawn, they let me walk into their territory without resistance.

That only gets me so far, as I need to get into the guarded heart of the syndicate territory to retrieve the part. Like the earlier Pyke encounter, if I can get in and get out without raising the alarm, Kay's reputation with Crimson Dawn won't take a hit, so I make that my goal. After some close calls and last-second stealth takedowns, I reach the part without making Crimson Dawn skittish about trusting me.

As if maintaining your reputation with the various crime bosses wasn't enough, don't forget the ever-looming presence of the Empire during this period. Despite the power and influence of Jabba or Qi'ra, the Empire holds the true power. As such, you don't have a reputation meter with them; they operate with a Wanted System instead. If you break enough rules, your wanted level rises. The more wanted you are, the worse the Empire makes your life.

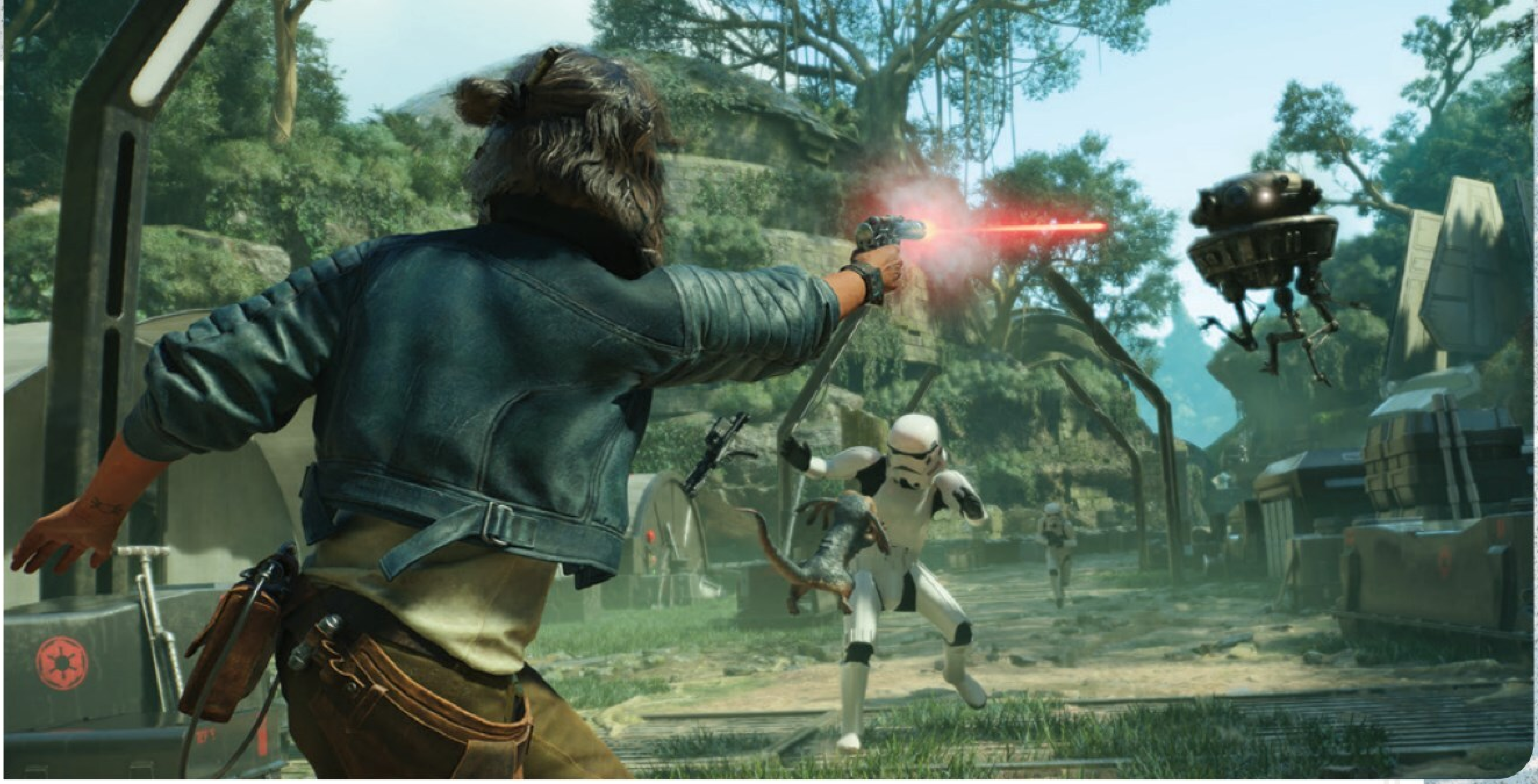
More Imperial troops join the hunt for you as your wanted level goes up, with the maximum level summoning elite enemies. You can try to hide to decrease your wanted level, but the higher your wanted level,

AN UNEXPECTED PLEASURE

Since Star Wars Outlaws takes place during the latter portion of the Original Trilogy, the galaxy is full of recognizable faces. We already know that Kay's adventure will see her cross paths with the likes of Jabba the Hutt, Lady Qi'ra, and Han Solo frozen in carbonite, but what about other icons from this era of Star Wars like Luke, Leia, Vader, Boba Fett, Chewbacca, or Lando?

When I ask about seeing additional classic Star Wars characters, creative director Julian Gerighty teases more familiar faces but will not budge on giving more details. "There are a few [recognizable] Star Wars characters that we'll meet across the adventure," he says with a smirk.

But fans worried about heavy-handed cameos and fanservice can breathe a sigh of relief, as associate narrative director John Björling understands that any character appearance must be earned to be impactful. "There are tons of characters that you could pull in, and you could probably force some excuses for why that should happen, but if it isn't earned by the character and the story, it will feel forced, and it's not going to be enjoyable," he says. "Where we've made those calls of, like, 'Who are the characters that she will cross paths with? Does it feel earned? Would she go there? How would she handle that?' et cetera. That has been our mantra for doing this, and I think it feels so much more rewarding that way."



the longer it takes the Empire to move on from the hunt. You can also meet with corrupt Imperial officers who might take a bribe or, in the worst scenario, participate in a challenging in-world event at the maximum wanted level.

Before wrapping up my demo, I get a brief chance to explore the open world of Toshara. With the press of a button, I summon a speeder, which Massive designed with inspiration from a Swedish manufacturer of motorbikes. The vehicle feels excellent in action – smooth, quick, and agile like a speeder should. After some brief navigation that includes hearing radio chatter for some activities I could pursue, I arrive at a small town called Jaunta's Hope, which is the current location of Kay's ship, the *Trailblazer*.

I need to go to a nearby building and grab an item from it. However, the door is locked. After a quick modification to Kay's blaster, her weapon gains the Ion Blast ability, which gives her an advantage over droid enemies and allows her to solve environmental puzzles like this one. Kay can access the building and loot all the goodies by shooting the two transformers for the lock with the Ion Blast.

I didn't get to explore the Reputation System to its fullest extent, nor did I get to interact with the Empire to where I can raise my wanted level, but from my hands-on session, I can tell I'm going to enjoy keeping up appearances to exploit the syndicates for maximum benefit. Star Wars Outlaws delivers systems stacked on top of other systems, and the result promises to provide the kind of scoundrel adventure that served as the studio's thesis statement when beginning development on the project.

A STRONG PRESENCE

Star Wars Outlaws takes various disparate elements of beloved games and places them in a galaxy far, far away to deliver something chock-full of potential. On the surface, it seems like it's going for a jack-of-all-trades approach with third-person combat, stealth, an ever-changing reputation, open-world exploration, speeder bike traversal, and space combat, but every piece of Outlaws I got my hands on felt worthy of its inclusion in this sprawling outer-space odyssey.

Though I only had a controller for a relatively small portion of my two days at the studio, the loop of exploring a bustling world that is definitively Star Wars, taking on jobs, making difficult choices, and working to get myself out of trouble sunk its hooks into me. My time with Massive Entertainment's scoundrel journey was rewarding, exciting, and – perhaps most importantly – whetted my appetite for the adventure. I can't wait to step into the shoes of Kay Vess as I try to charm, swindle, backstab, and shoot my way through the galaxy. ■

Want more Star Wars Outlaws exclusive content? Head to GameInformer.com/StarWarsOutlaws for developer interviews, feature deep dives, and more

Unearthing the vibrant thrills of Sand Land

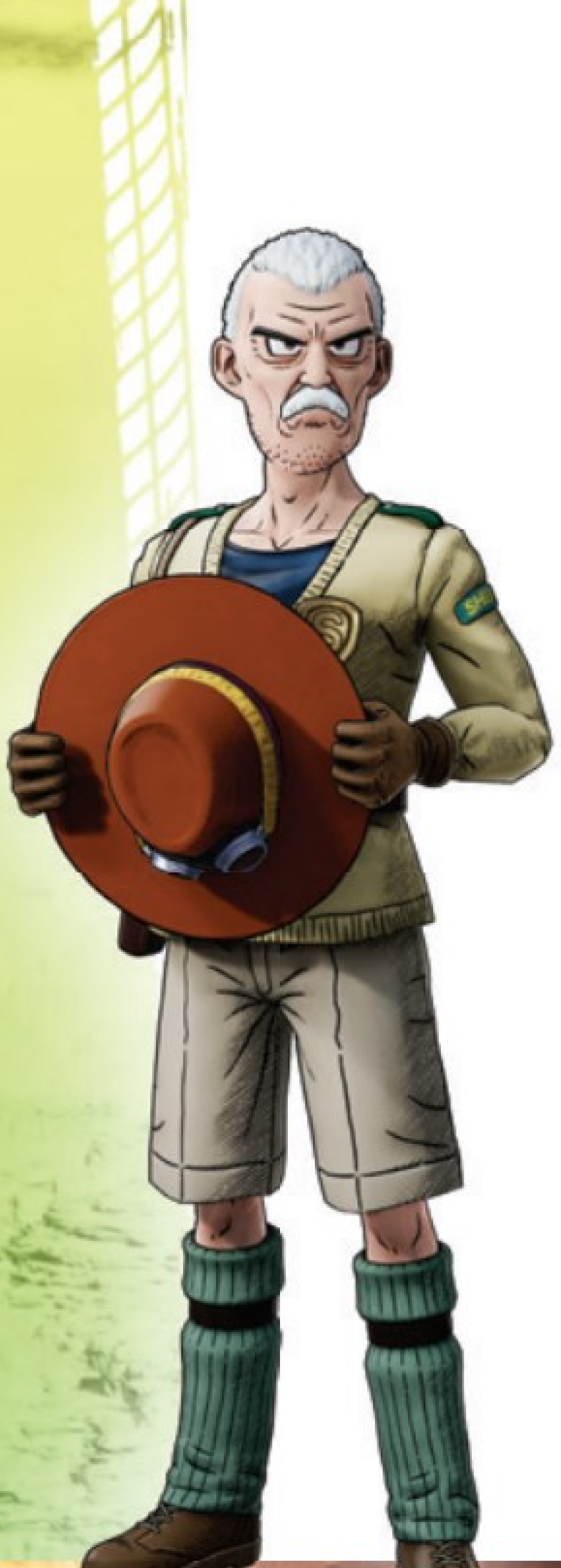
DUNE CRUISIN'

by Marcus Stewart

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Bandai Namco
DEVELOPER ILCA, Inc. **RELEASE** April 26

For most manga fans, the name Akira Toriyama likely conjures one image: Goku. The legendary manga artist, who unexpectedly passed away this year, has become immortalized thanks to his greatest creation, Dragon Ball. But while the adventures of Goku and his friends will chiefly define Toriyama's legacy (which you can read more about on p. 52), the artist is responsible for other works, such as *Dr. Slump*, *Pink*, and his 2000 manga (and accompanying film) *Sand Land*.

If you've never heard of Sand Land, imagine combining Mad Max with Dragon Ball, and you have a rough approximation of its vibe. Sand Land's world sees humans and demons share a tense coexistence in a vast desert marred by years of war. The land's greedy king has monopolized the water supply, making it a valuable commodity that has turned ordinary citizens into bandits and outlaws vying for every drop.



An ex-soldier named Sheriff Rao becomes fed up with the king's greed, so he turns to the demons for help. But he doesn't manage to recruit just any old fiend; he gets Beelzebub, the young and attitudinal demon prince. Joining Beelzebub is his wizened friend Thief, who is, you guessed it, very good at stealing. The three hop into a tank and embark on a grand quest that... well, you'll have to read the manga to learn how it plays out.

If you decide to forgo reading the manga, watching the 2023 animated film, or checking out its 2024 animated series, Sand Land's eponymous video game debut offers another good entry point. Developed by ILCA, makers of One Piece Odyssey and Pokémon Brilliant Diamond/Shining Pearl, Toriyama's sandy universe has been transformed into an open-world action RPG with an original narrative set after the events of the manga (although Bandai assures that newcomers can hop right into this without prior familiarity). I traveled to Bandai Namco's office in Irvine, California, to play a few hours of the game across multiple areas to see how Beezlebub fares in an interactive playground.

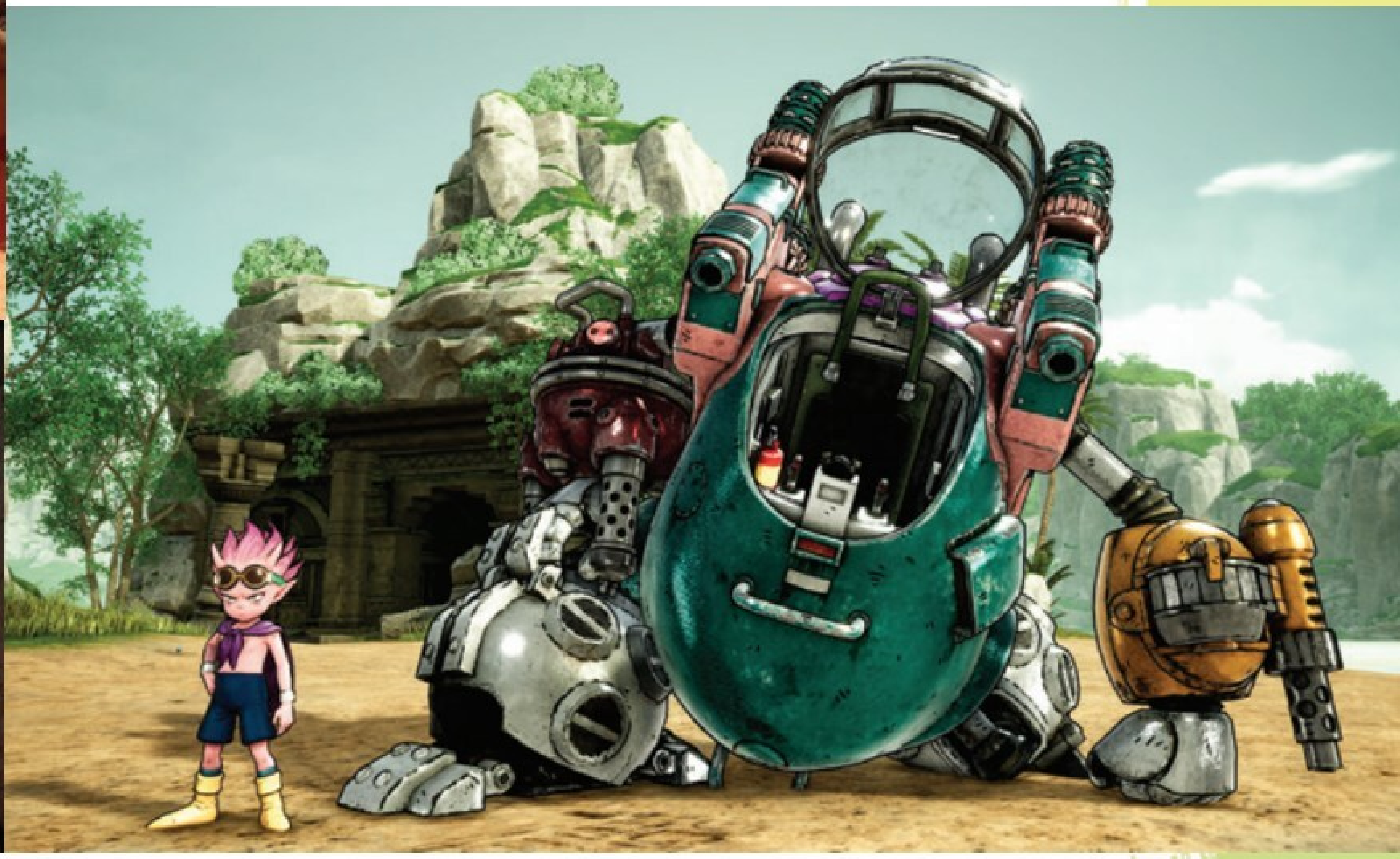
Fire Your Engines

Fans recently got to explore a slice of Sand Land's open world thanks to a demo, but I got to experience meatier chunks of the adventure, set roughly 30 hours into its evidently lengthy runtime.

Sand Land's big hook is a focus on vehicle combat, as Beelzebub, the game's protagonist, can pilot a slew of different machines. In my demo, I had access to a motorbike, a tank, a hovercraft, and two types of mech suits. One suit can execute powerful vertical leaps that are good for reaching high places. Another is more combat-focused, sporting a machine gun, and you can pummel foes with its metallic fists. A d-pad selection wheel makes it easy to pick the desired vehicle on the fly, with Beelzebub tossing a small device that causes chosen vehicles to appear in a sparkly puff of smoke a la capsules in Dragon Ball.

The motorbike works best for general exploration thanks to its speed, and mounted machine guns let players mow down threats on the go. Sand Land's focus on vehicle combat is appealing to me as a long-time fan of the dormant car combat genre. The desert teems with roaming creatures such as various dinosaurs and giant lion-like beasts, plus plenty of armed bandits piloting death machines of their own. While the motorbike has enough firepower to deal with the average opposition, I switch to the more combat-focused tank to handle sturdier foes. Its powerful machine gun (with a sniper scope for precision targeting) and explosive shells can quickly reduce opposition to heaps of twisted metal.

In a great touch, you can seamlessly switch from driving one vehicle to another without first going back to playing as Beelzebub on foot. This means you can drive the motorbike and instantly transform into the tank without hitting the brakes. I wish vehicles would stick around longer once you get off them. They often disappear as soon as they're out of frame, and I grew tired of repeatedly re-summoning the motorbike whenever I stepped off to briefly inspect something.



Beelzebub is no slouch on his own. He can execute basic melee combos and hold his own against most threats I encountered. Strength/defense-raising serums, purchased from wandering vendors, can temporarily boost the young ruler's capabilities. The main party members each sport standard skill trees that widen their offensive capabilities, too. Even still, Sand Land clearly wants players to utilize vehicles as often as possible, as enemy machines and more powerful wildlife can wear down the demon prince quickly. Although Sheriff Rao and Thief offer constant companionship (not to mention a barrage of way-too-repetitious ambient dialogue), their contributions to combat don't feel immediately apparent or impactful.

Defeating enemies and scouring the world uncovers resources used to upgrade or purchase vehicle enhancements. Vehicles can sport two weapons, and visiting workshops offer more powerful variants of each one with different stat properties and effects. The same applies to new engines, armor, and mobility parts. There's enough number crunching involved that serious players can do a fair amount of min-maxing if they want, or you can just do what I did: choose the weapon sporting the highest number of green arrows pointing upwards.

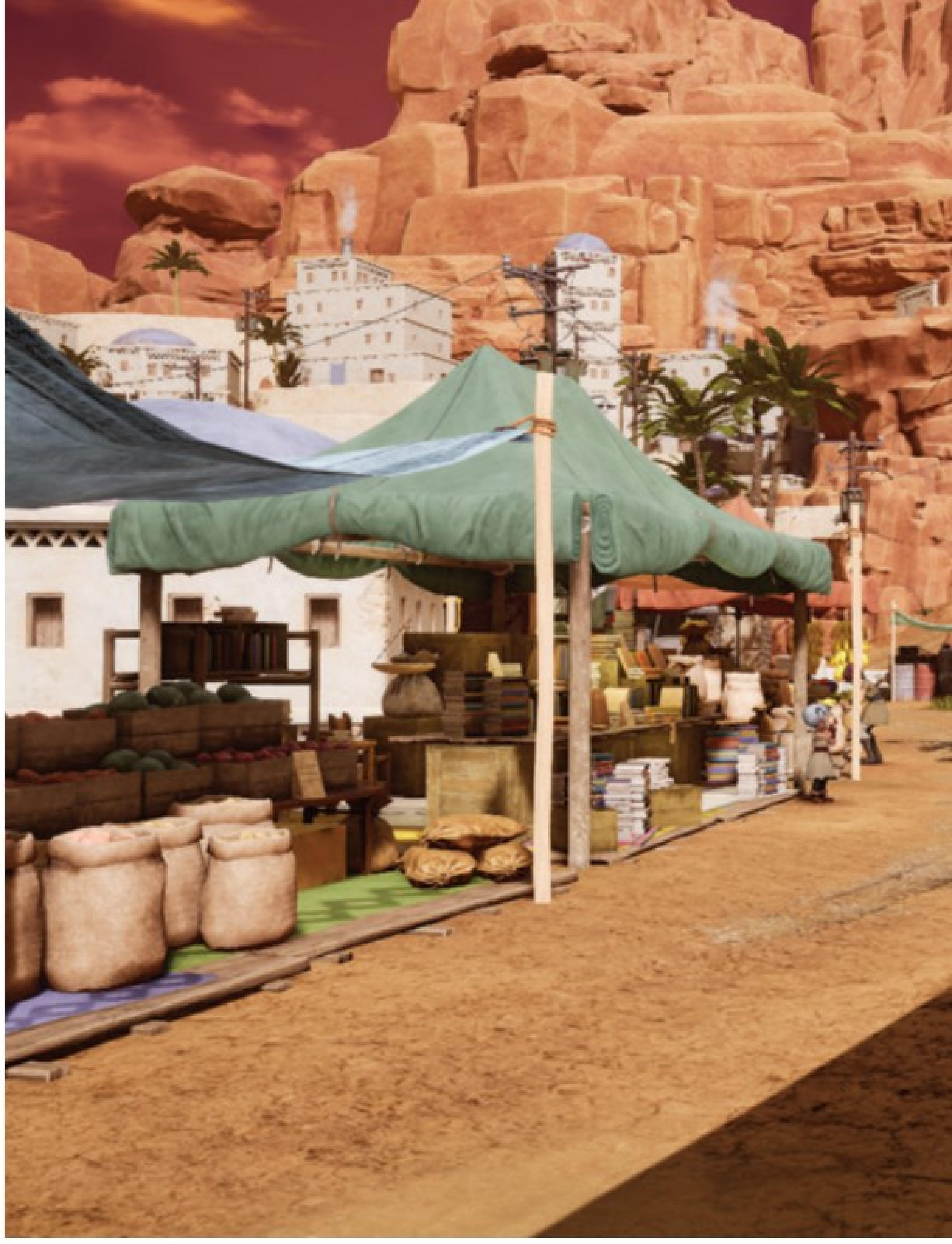
Regardless of what shape your vehicles take, driving around is fun if for no other reason than to immerse oneself in Toriyama's art. Sand Land looks great. In addition to traditional sidequests, I stumbled upon radio towers that, once repaired using the necessary materials, reveal more landmarks. Distinctive tall rock columns require the jumping mech to ascend, which usually has goodies such as a treasure chest. I don't spend too much time with these diversions; instead, I choose to book it for the main attraction: a dungeon.

I make for subterranean ruins located behind a waterfall. The hovercraft becomes my best friend during this section as it's suited for navigating the water – and Beelzebub can't swim. Getting through this massive complex of a dilapidated temple requires raising/lowering the water level in flood areas to reach the next exit. Wide staircases and corridors allow me to pilot the hovercraft into zones meant for on-foot traversal. This process isn't always the most straightforward form of navigation for such interiors, but I appreciate that Sand Land allows players to stay in their vehicles more often than not, especially since you can still open chests and collect loot while piloting machinery.

This dungeon takes a while to get through, partly due to my thorough exploration of alternative hallways leading to extra treasures. Enemies such as giant alligators hide beneath the waves of several flooded rooms, waiting to strike hapless foes. Though they catch me a few times, doing so gives me the satisfying pleasure of blasting them with the hovercraft's missile launcher.

After a lengthy trek of flipping switches to raise water levels, hopping across spinning waterwheels, and dodging rocks on fast-moving waterways, I encounter my first boss battle: a Kraken. Taking down this massive squid requires unleashing hell on its ample-sized head while dodging streams of water balls spat from its beak. I also use the hovercraft's limited extended hover boost to hop over its swinging tentacles. At specific points, I land on scattered patches of earth. With solid ground beneath me, I switch to the tank to unleash a more powerful (though mobility-limited) offense. It's an enjoyable battle, and I like the flexibility of either relying solely on my hovercraft to take it down or utilizing the small islands to attack using my land-based vehicles.

After the Kraken absorbs its final bullet, its defeat signals a transition into a big and surprising element of Sand Land: Forest Land.



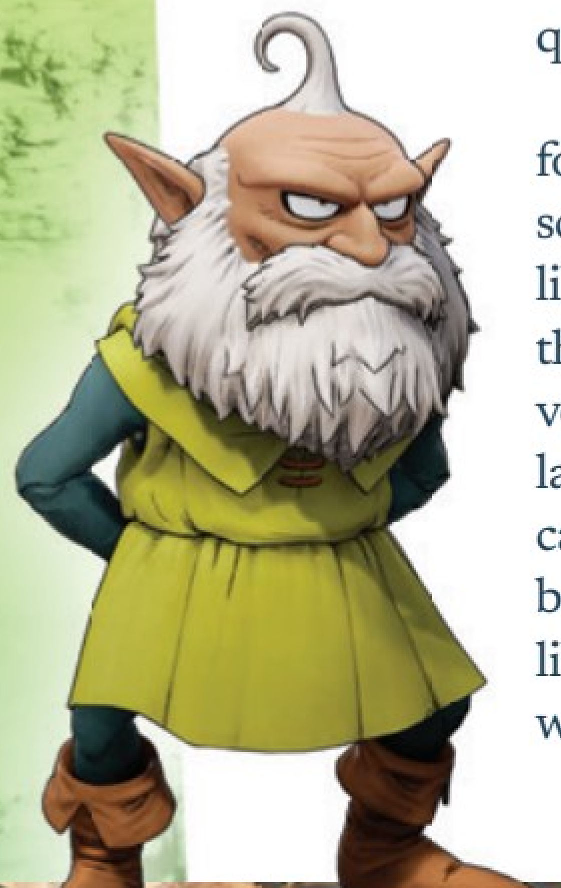
Welcome To Forest Land

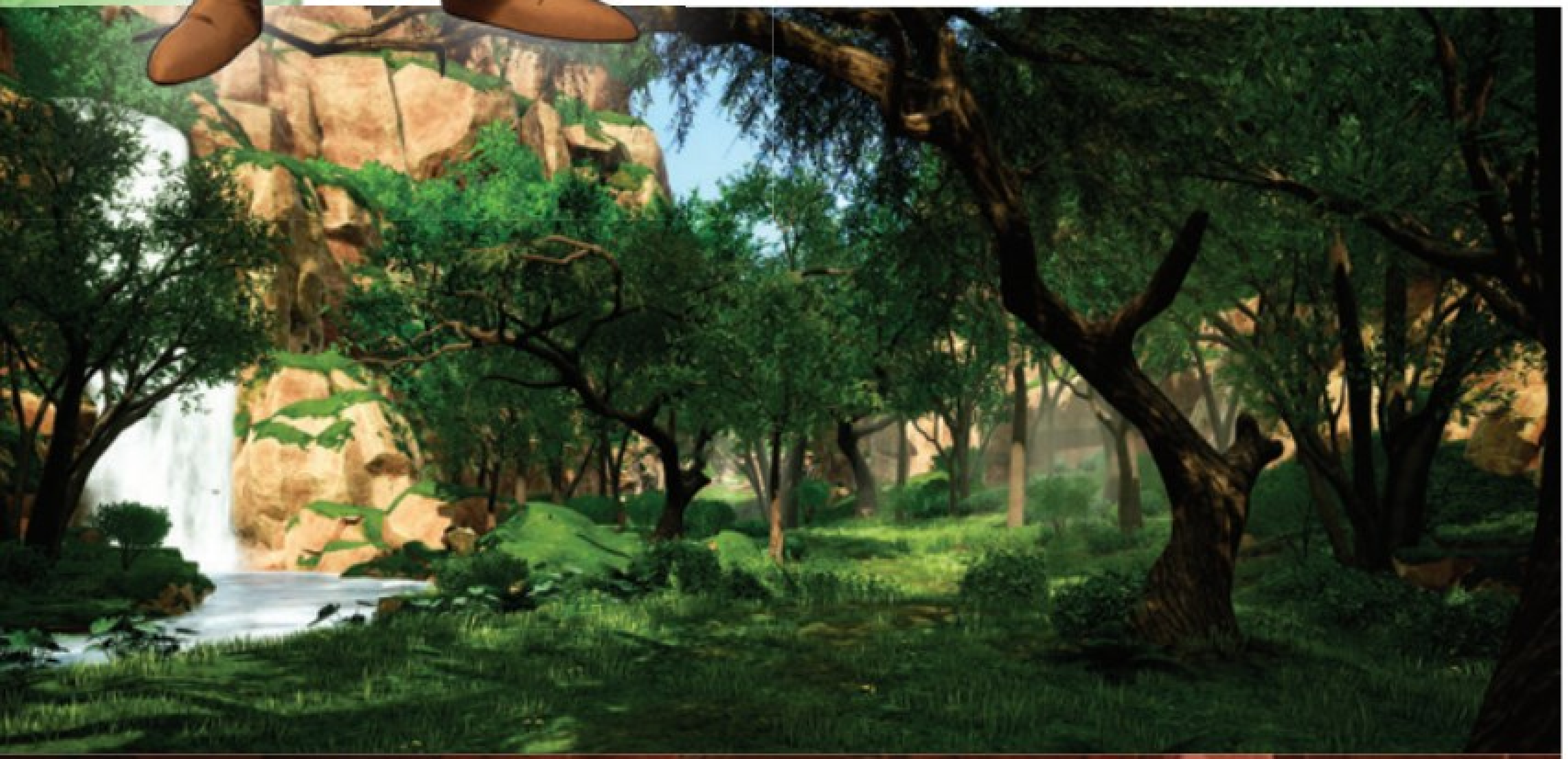
I eventually move on to another section of the game set in a brand-new biome for the franchise called Forest Land. This lush green environment is a stark contrast to the dunes players will spend dozens of hours exploring beforehand, so you'll have played a big chunk of the game before even seeing this zone.

Dragon Ball fans will feel right at home in Forest Land thanks to similar topographic features such as massive, grass-topped cliffs and sweeping fields. I noticed some of the same environmental challenges found in Sand Land, such as the tall jumping pillars, but I don't know how different Forest Land's offerings are as I focus on the main objective.

The story takes me to a resistance camp, and after a sequence I won't spoil, I'm tasked with infiltrating an enemy base to rescue a captive ally. Since the facility is heavily populated with goons, stealth becomes the name of the game. Infiltration involves sneaking up on patrolling targets by crouching and quietly dispatching them.

Beelzebub won't be snapping necks or choking folks out; instead, they will opt to perform a jump scare that frightens foes so badly that they stiffen like a board and fall unconscious. It's cute and fits the character's mischievous nature, but stealth is also very basic and, at least in this section, and not particularly challenging. It can become tedious since getting caught means re-doing the current room from the beginning. This lack of flexibility feels dated and will likely be especially frustrating for those who struggle with stealth segments in general.





To Build A Village

Once my demo concludes, Bandai Namco treats me to an exclusive breakdown of Sand Land's town-building element. At a certain point in the story, players encounter a small, ruined settlement out in the desert that they are tasked with restoring.

One important NPC players can recruit is Lassi, a cat-like traveler who deals in rare goods such as treasure maps and more exotic vehicle weaponry like lasers, grenade launchers, and particle cannons. As you progress the adventure, you meet other faces you can collect, so to speak, for your home base. Residents bring wants and desires in the form of sidequests, so the more populous your city becomes, the wider your quest log balloons.

Your city can be upgraded up to five times, and each improvement unlocks new buildings and stores, invites new citizens, and the overall aesthetic gets a facelift. When I see it at Tier 1, the city is little more than a rocky pit of sand, weeds, and bombed-out buildings. Each improvement tier brings resources such as water into the city (including a gigantic water wheel), and you even unlock traversal mechanics such as a zipline network to help explore the city more easily. By Tier 5, the city is a bustling metropolis with buildings stacked on buildings, multiple elevation levels, more greenery, waterfalls, a marketplace, and more.

Unlockable businesses include a vehicle customization shop, which allows you to cosmetically change your vehicles with different paint schemes, patterns, and finishes, such as gloss. You'll also unlock an item shop, a garage for swapping out

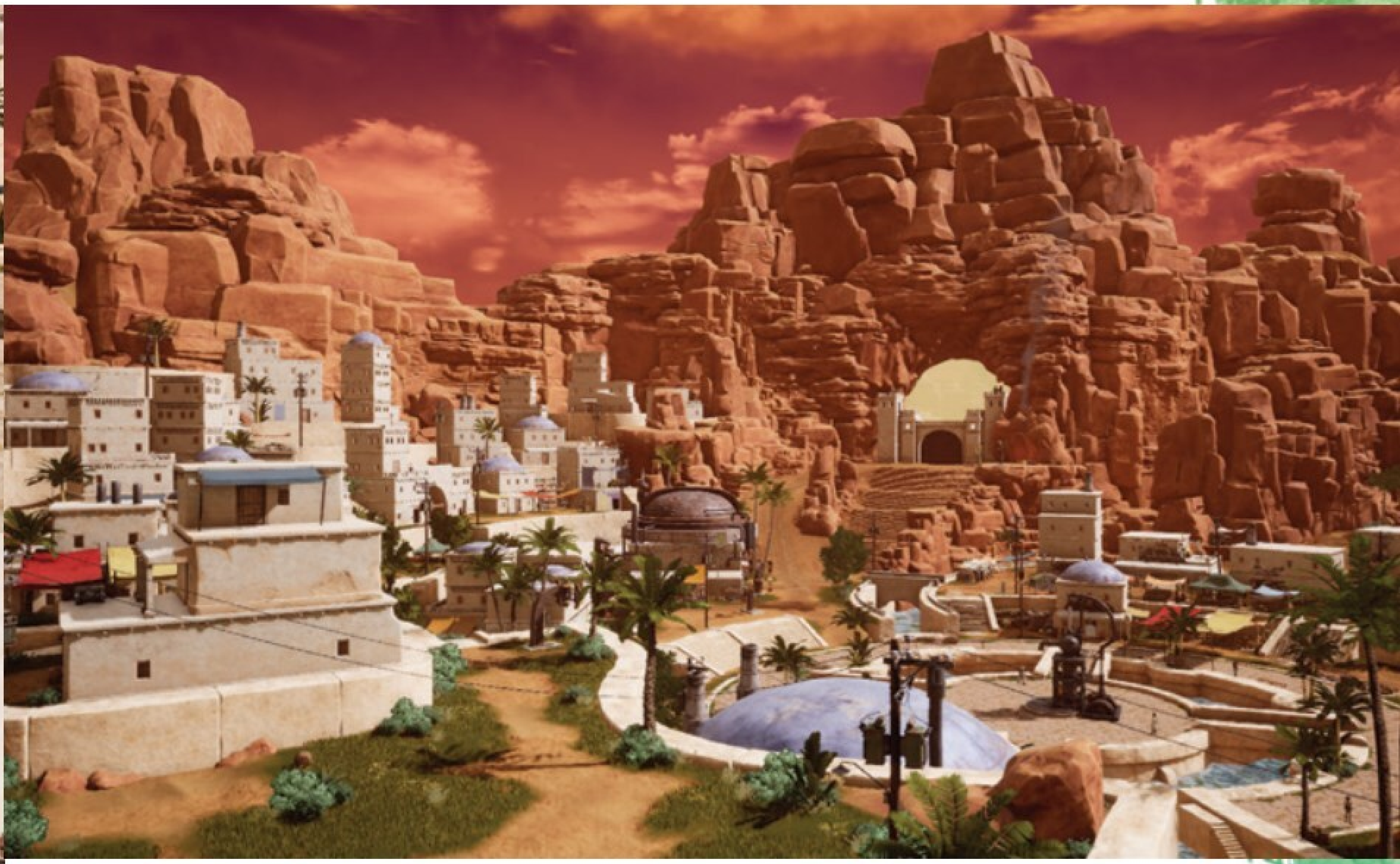
vehicle parts, and inns to rest at, among other establishments. A bounty board will also appear that tasks players with locating and defeating notorious targets, providing mini-boss fights for sharpening your skills while obtaining rare weapons and other rewards. Shops evolve alongside the city, as they'll offer more extensive, more valuable inventories with each upgrade tier.

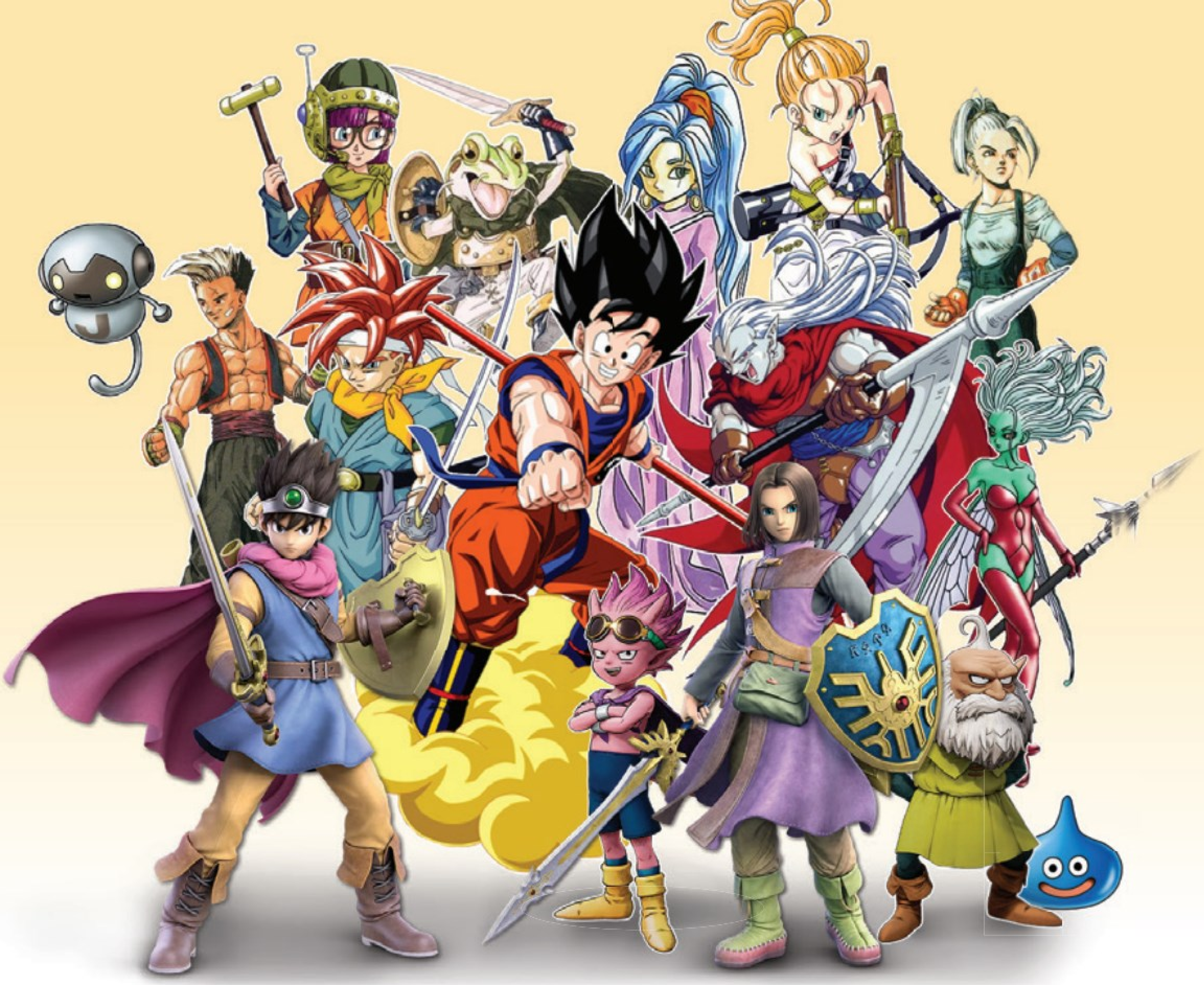
Beelzebub needs his own space, too, and behind the garage sits his personal home that players can customize from scratch. What begins as a series of empty, plain rooms can be livened up on a broad level by applying cosmetic themes such as forest or sci-fi. You can also place individual decor items such as furniture and trophies, and you display your vehicles, too. New cosmetic items for your home can be found by completing missions; Bandai mentions defeating a sub-boss to unlock a rare chair as an example.

Despite this feature's many perks, Bandai also tells me players can invest as much or as little time into improving their city as they choose. Maxing out the city isn't required to complete the story. Those who plan to partake can expect to spend dozens of hours shining up the town, depending on how much you focus on it.

What I saw of Sand Land didn't veer far from expectations or offer a lot of novelty, but I enjoyed my time playing. Outside of the vehicle combat, it feels like a totally competent action RPG carried by Toriyama's signature charm and personality. Piloting bikes, tanks, and other bots is where the game stands out, and the arcade-like thrill of blowing up enemy tanks or simply ramming into hapless goons is good fun. The vehicle customization and town-building features also show signs of an unexpected depth. As someone who's growing increasingly weary of open-world fluff, I'm mildly worried about the scope of Sand Land's side activities, so here's hoping it has plenty of real meat to chew on.

As a decades-long fan of Toriyama, I was already curious to experience Sand Land's world for the first time through this game. I wasn't familiar with the manga prior to the game's reveal, and admittedly, Toriyama's passing has skyrocketed the game closer to "must-play" status. But after spending some quality time with Beelzebub and his gang of benevolent rogues, I'm more confident I'll have solid fun with it beyond treating it as an interactive eulogy to one of my favorite artists. ■





REMEMBERING
AKIRA TORIYAMA

The *Dragon Ball* creator was not primarily a video game artist, but his influence on the medium is impossible to ignore

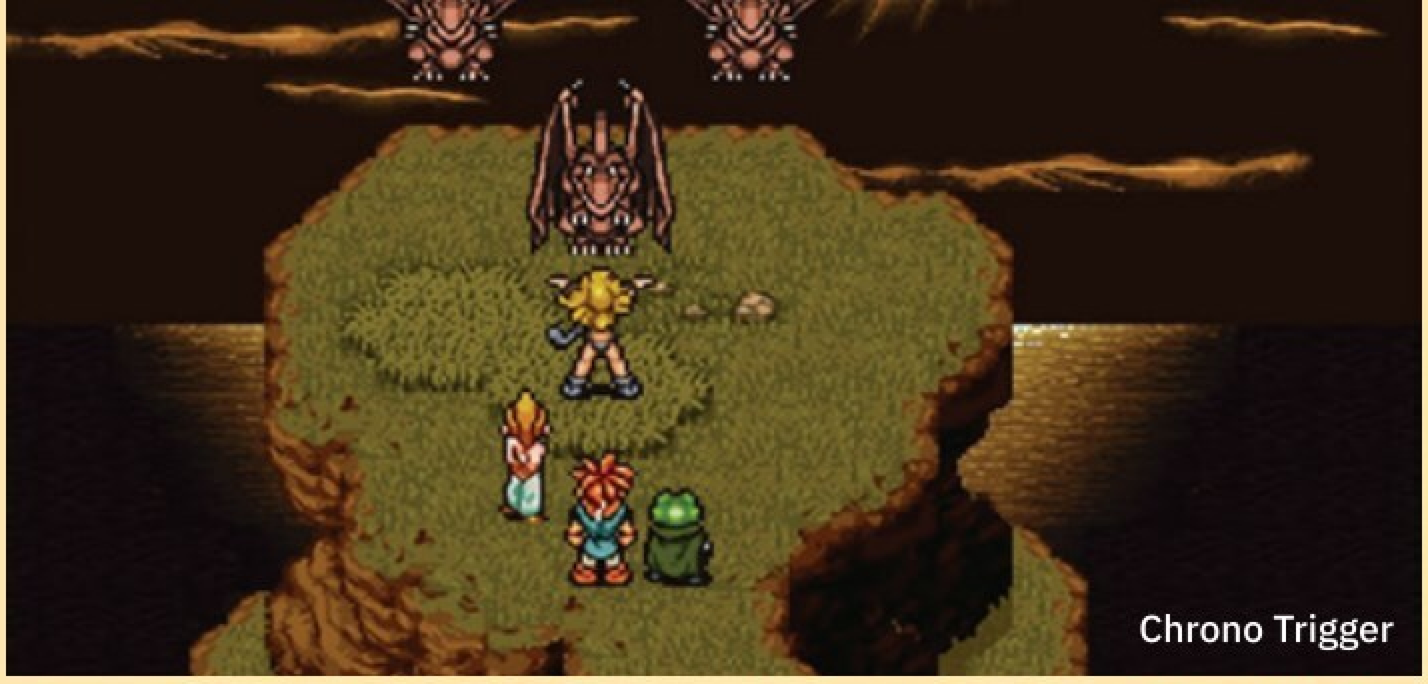
BY KYLE HILLIARD

AT THE BEGINNING OF MARCH 2024, the world learned of the unexpected passing of artist and writer Akira Toriyama. He was 68 years old. For generations to come, Toriyama will primarily be remembered as the creator of the manga *Dragon Ball*. The *Journey to the West*-inspired series followed the story of Goku, a powerful young fighter on an adventure to find the seven Dragon Balls, which, when joined, would grant a wish. The series evolved and changed over the years following Goku throughout his life to see him get married, have children, see those children have children, and become arguably the most powerful fighter in not just anime and manga, but potentially all fiction.

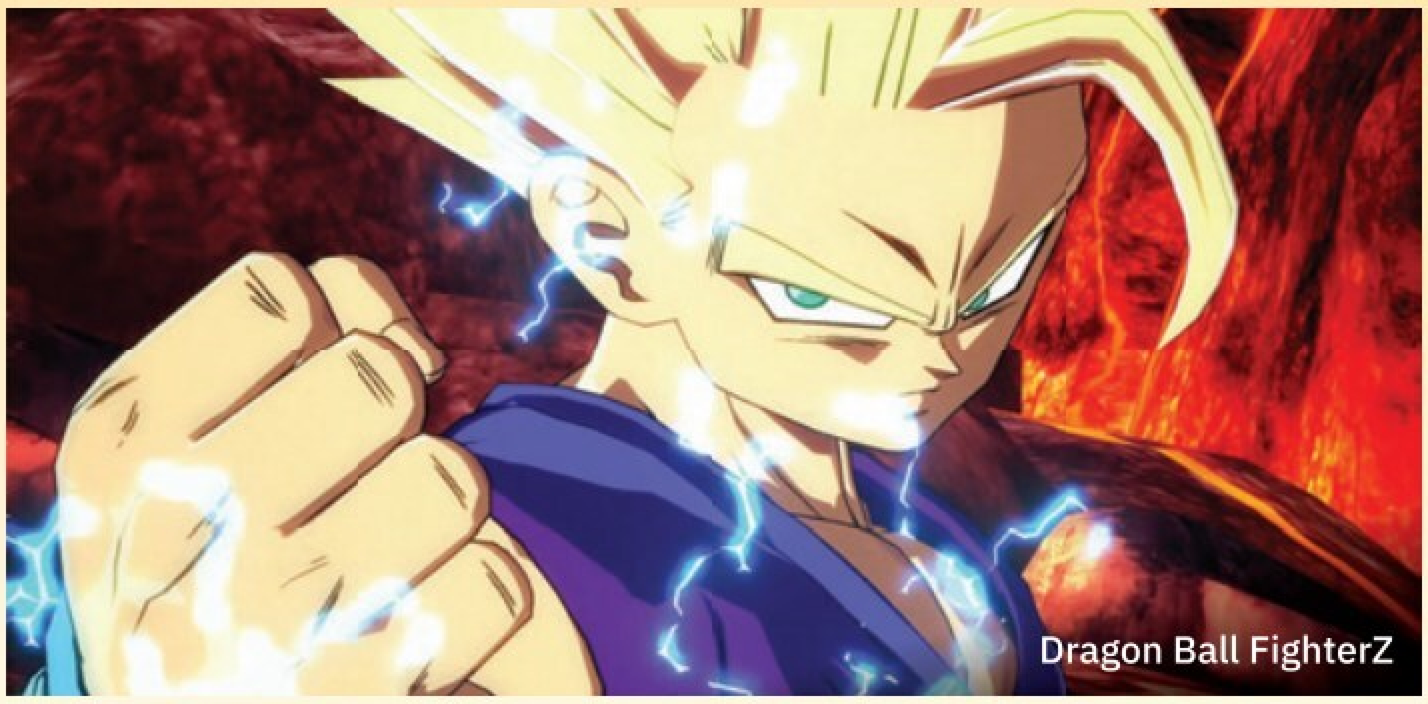
Toriyama's influence on his chosen medium is undeniable, and just about every manga and its anime adaptation that followed cites him and his work as a major impact. When he passed, artists and writers like *One Piece* creator Eiichiro Oda stated, "For manga artists of my generation who stood on the same stage, we realized that the closer we got to Toriyama's work, the greater it became." Masashi Kishimoto, the creator of *Naruto* said of Toriyama, "Mr. Toriyama was always my compass. He was my inspiration."

Toriyama personally took less interest in the world of video games than manga and anime, but his art style is so inviting and recognizable that even when he represented only a portion of a project, it couldn't help but be identified as a Toriyama game. Dragon Quest (initially released as Dragon Warrior in the West) was released in 1986 and was a massive success in Japan thanks to Toriyama's role as the series' artist. Humorously, Toriyama once said that if he had known how long he would be involved with Dragon Quest when he first signed up, he probably would have passed.

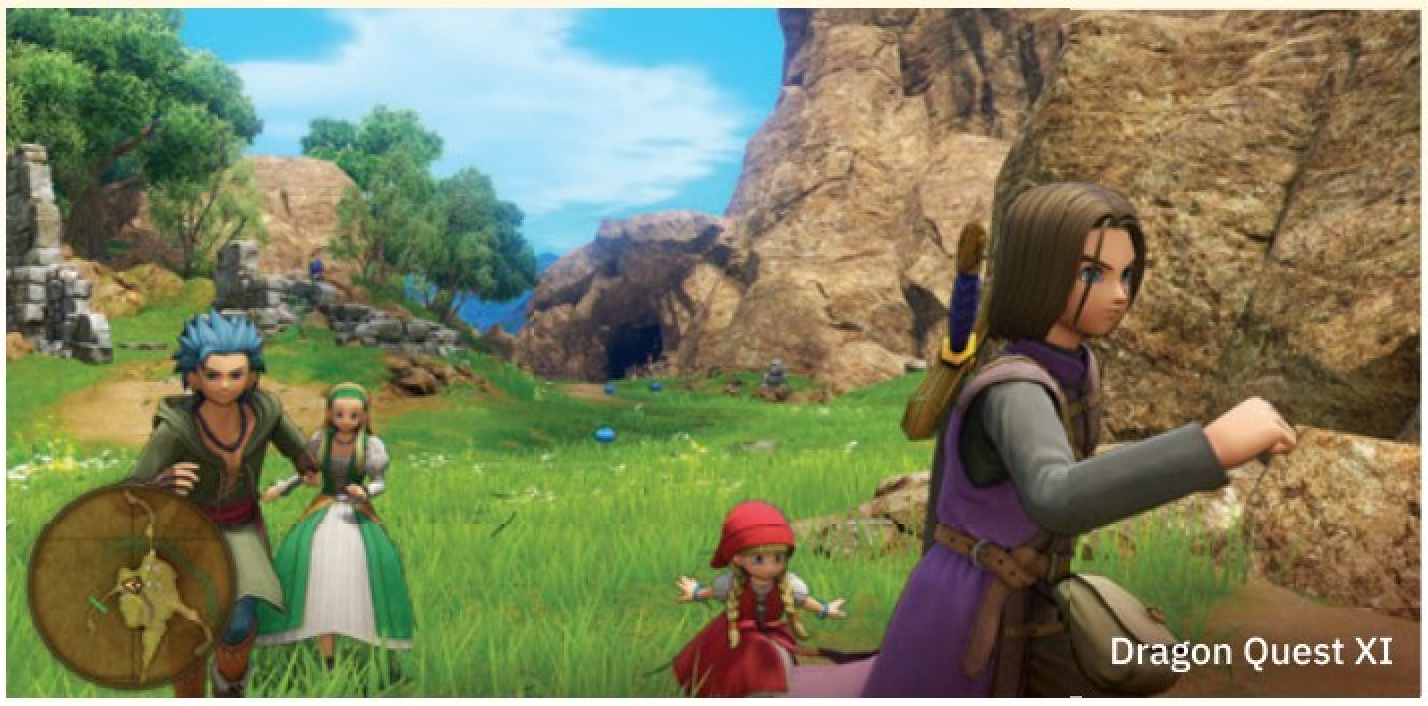
The limitations of the NES prevented Toriyama's art from being fully realized in the overworld, but he drew the box art and illustrations in the instruction booklet. In battle, monsters encountered in the game took up the full screen when they appeared, which made it easy to identify his style. The blue slime monster – meant to be Dragon Quest's easiest-to-defeat monster – is a brilliant and simple design that has moved beyond simply being a mascot for Dragon Quest and is now an



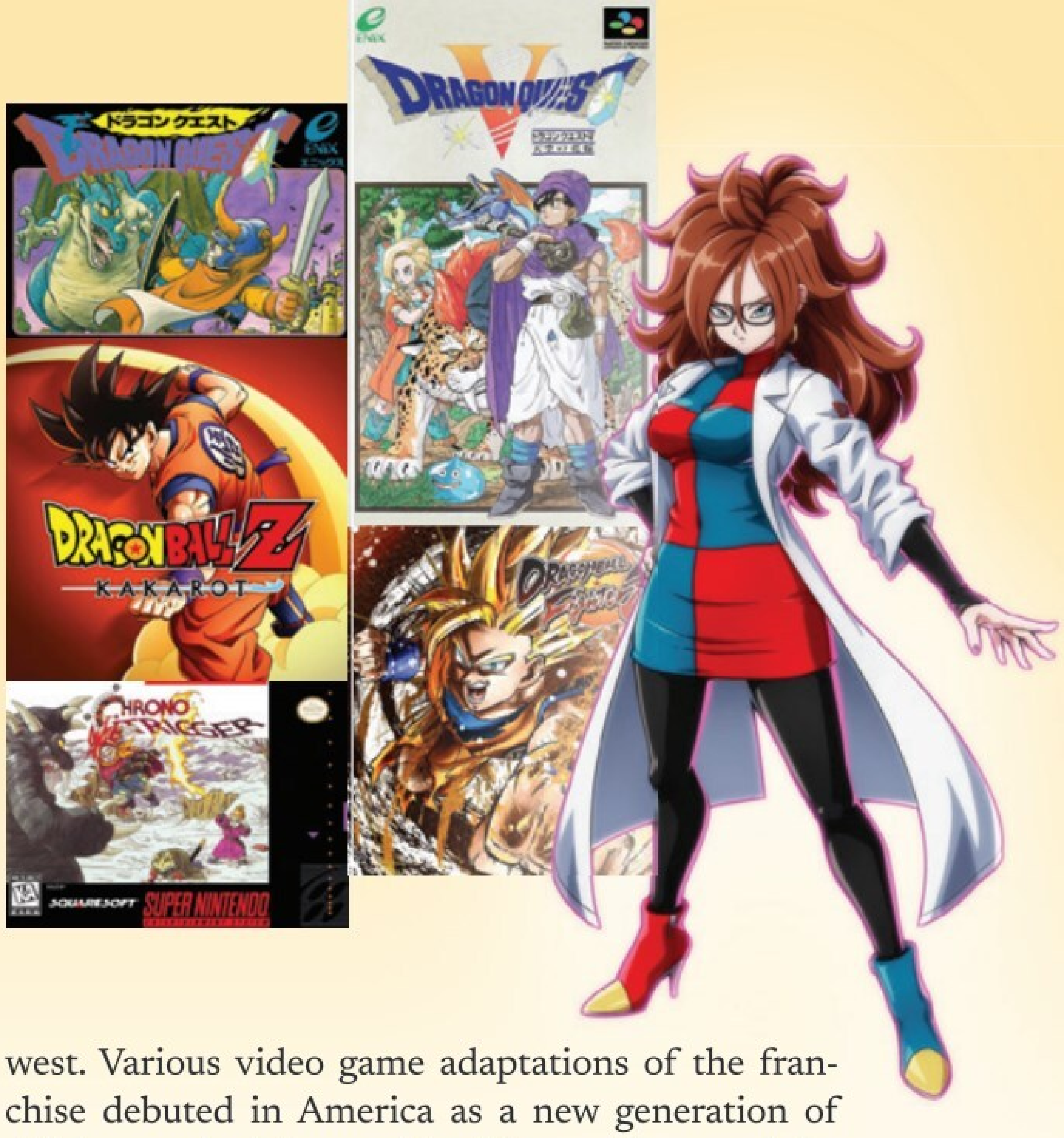
Chrono Trigger



Dragon Ball FighterZ



Dragon Quest XI



iconic signifier of the JRPG genre. Toriyama continued to design the main cast of characters for all the Dragon Quest games, up to most recently 2017's Dragon Quest XI. Considering Dragon Quest XII has been in development for some time, we're hopeful Toriyama was able to design its cast before his untimely passing.

Following the success of Dragon Quest, Square (at the time competing with Dragon Quest publisher Enix) brought on Toriyama to design the art of Chrono Trigger. Despite utilizing his familiar style, Toriyama managed to craft monsters, primary characters, and an overall look entirely distinct from his ongoing Dragon Quest work. When Chrono Trigger was released in 1995 on Super Nintendo, JRPG was still a relatively niche genre in the West, but its compelling box art and even more compelling in-game art pushed the game to become a beloved hit. On the Super Nintendo, Toriyama's art was nearly fully realized, and in the case of Chrono Trigger, looked even closer to his hand-drawn art than the first Super Nintendo Dragon Quest game, Dragon Quest V, released three years prior.

Dragon Quest VIII in 2004 would mark the series' first fully 3D adaptation, but before that, in 1996 and 1997, Toriyama served as the artist on a pair of fighting games called Tobal No. 1 and Tobal 2. This marked the first instance of Toriyama's art being adapted to 3D, but in the world of fighting games, Dragon Ball, unsurprisingly, is where Toriyama's art would see the most success.

As the Chrono Trigger, Dragon Quest, and Tobal games slowly found American fans, *Dragon Ball* began to earnestly make its way west. Various video game adaptations of the franchise debuted in America as a new generation of children and adults outside of Japan discovered the anime. The Dragon Ball Z Budokai fighting game series was the first video game instance of the franchise being a phenomenon. Two Dragon Ball fighting games are on the top 50 of the list of top-selling PlayStation 2 games (another Toriyama game, Dragon Quest VIII: Journey of the Cursed King, is number 12), and to this day, Dragon Ball games are exciting, frequent releases. Arc System Works' Dragon Ball FighterZ launched in 2018 and continues to be a fighting game tournament staple and features Android 21, a character designed by Toriyama exclusively for the game. Dragon Ball Sparking Zero, the next entry in the Budokai Tenkaichi series, is planned for release in the next year.

In the same way Toriyama was instrumental in the art direction of Dragon Quest and Chrono Trigger, he returned for one more giant RPG with Blue Dragon in 2006. For Blue Dragon, Toriyama worked with Hironobu Sakaguchi, one of the primary original creators and writers of the Final Fantasy series, to create a new fantasy universe. Toriyama designed the characters and monsters for the game and was instrumental in the anime adaptation. Sand Land (read more on p. 46) is also planned for this year and is a full video game adaptation of his 2000 manga series.

Toriyama was not a video game creator, but his art was crucial to video games both as a primary artist and as a source of inspiration. His passing was unexpected and heartbreaking; even if he wasn't dictating the full art direction as he did for games like Chrono Trigger and Blue Dragon, it seemed he would always be available to raise his pen to design new, original singular characters for the rest of time. We're incredibly sad that he will never draw again but are thankful that he was willing to move outside of his manga and anime bubble to offer his iconic art to a number of beloved, timeless video games. ■

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DUNE: AWAKENING

Spicing things up

With some unbelievable heat surrounding the Dune franchise following the theatrical release of the critically acclaimed *Dune: Part Two*, Conan Exiles developer Funcom provided a huge update for its anticipated MMO, Dune: Awakening.

Dune: Awakening is an MMO that uses the survival genre as its starting point. Players set out in Arrakis' harsh, unwelcoming environment in an alternate timeline from the films. Finding refuge, crafting resources, and, perhaps most importantly, water are your top priorities, initially. As you progress to the experience's later stages, however, the Dune series' political aspects step into the forefront.

Amassing political power is one possible endgame, but not the only one. Funcom hopes to create a sandbox experience where players can choose their own path, even if the title was designed with the series' political intrigue as a main underpinning of the late-game portions. For example, one player may want to become a scouter who maps out the world and then sells those maps to other players, while another might want to become an in-game architect who uses the in-game marketplace to sell blueprints of buildings to others.

"We took what we started with in Conan Exiles – our other survival game – we brought that over, then we started to add to it," creative director Joel Bylos said in a recent Dune: Awakening Direct livestream. "We've now created a system for co-op building, where you can place out holograms, and other players can fill them in, so you work with your friends to build bases. You can also save your bases, like an architectural blueprint, that you can then sell to other players on the Exchange, or you can give to your friends if you make something cool."

Dune: Awakening features what they call "Combined Arms," giving players the option of using melee, ranged, and abilities. While conventional means like sniper rifles and swords may feel in line with what a lot of MMOs and action titles offer, you can also attend the Great Schools and learn special abilities like Voice from the Bene Gesserit Sisterhood, allowing you to compel your enemies to obey your commands.

And, of course, it wouldn't be Dune without the iconic sandworms. These mammoth beasts serve as a tension mechanic in Dune: Awakening. You cannot hurt or defeat them, but what you can do is expect them. "We wanted you to be really worried every time you walk on the sand, so you really need to think about what you're doing," Bylos said in the video. "The only thing you can do is avoid the sandworms. So, you craft yourself a Thumper and place it out to distract a sandworm, maybe use it to lure a sandworm onto some friends of yours."

Perhaps one of the most innovative ways Dune: Awakening leverages the desert setting of Arrakis is through its Shifting Sands mechanic. Within the massive PvP area, each week, the Coriolis Storm sweeps through and changes the entire landscape. This also means players will need to be strategic about where they build their bases, but they can also use bases that aren't long for this world to their advantage.

"There are good places to build and bad places to build," Bylos said during a group Q&A session. "They have this thing called the Shield Wall, and outside the Shield Wall is the deep desert. The deep desert is where the Coriolis Storms hit their strongest effect and will just destroy everything – and I mean everything. Inside the Shield Wall is a safe place where you can build; it diminishes the force of the storms. What I expect to happen is – we put very valuable things in the deep desert – and [...] what I'm expecting is that players use the blueprint system to take a copy of their buildings, they take them out with them, they set up logistics bases in the deep desert with the knowledge that those things are gonna get wiped every week. And then they have their home, they keep that decorated and nice, but they're continually going out to compete with other people over the big spice blows in the deep desert and compete for harvesting operations."

All of the footage shown during the Dune: Awakening Direct looks promising, consisting of high-fidelity graphics and compelling gameplay set within the Dune universe. However, though the game has been running closed betas for a while now, the team does not currently have a window for when the game will be released. Still, even now, weeks after seeing *Dune: Part Two*, I'm looking for ways to spend more time in the Dune universe. If that feeling persists until Funcom's ambitious MMO arrives, Dune: Awakening seems like a great way to further explore the sandy surface of Arrakis. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE MMORPG **PUBLISHER** Funcom **DEVELOPER** Funcom **RELEASE** TBD

MECHWARRIOR 5: CLANS

New pilots wanted

The MechWarrior series has an interesting history and trajectory, especially as it pertains to video games. It has always been an adaptation of the BattleTech tabletop wargame, which has evolved into a fictionalized universe with more than 100 book adaptations and, of course, video games. The first MechWarrior game was released in 1989 as a 2D strategy game for DOS computers, but the franchise adopted 3D graphics and gameplay faster than most. In 1995, MechWarrior 2: 31st Century Combat launched for various platforms and featured full, first-person mech-controlling 3D graphics.

Understandably, all the subsequent MechWarrior games have been successors to 31st Century Combat in terms of gameplay and action, but Piranha Games CEO Russ Bullock says Clans is the first MechWarrior since that 1995 release to overtly embrace the established lore and fiction of the franchise. "Clans is the first game since [MechWarrior 2] that lets the player play as the clan and their big invasion back to the inner sphere," Bullock says, identifying an important element of BattleTech's story so far underexplored in the video games. "A lot of that richness and story has really never come into the video games. They've been focused on the action."

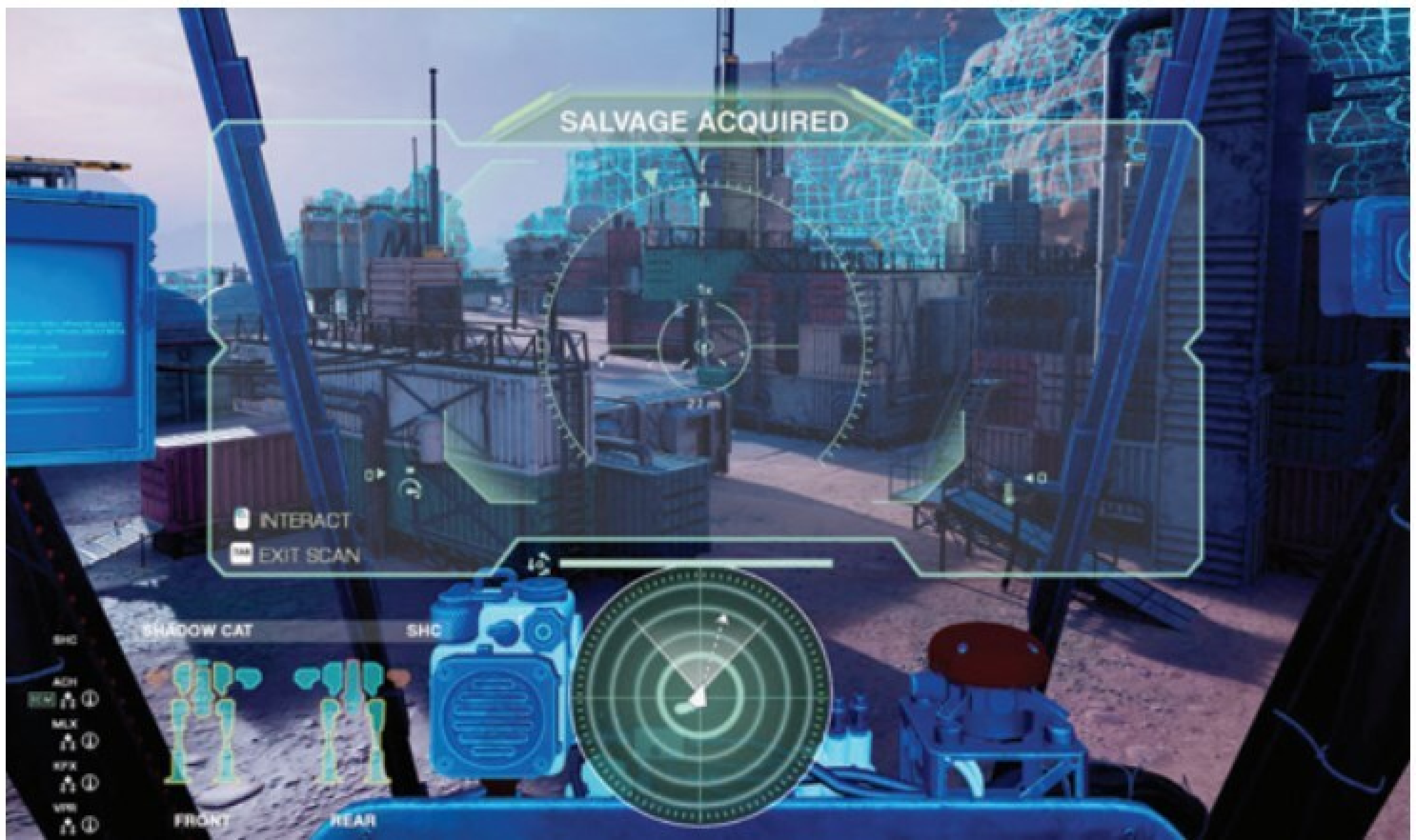
Bullock kicks off a demo after that statement, and even though I don't know the lore of BattleTech, it is undeniably clear that story is playing a crucial role. A presumably opening cutscene shows five soldiers walking into a gigantic hangar filled with mechs as a synth soundtrack narrates their entrance. Recent MechWarrior games have leaned on metal music for their soundtracks, but I am instantly enamored by the new musical direction. The soldiers use terms and planet names I am unfamiliar with and poke fun at each other before a commander shows up to remind them that what they're doing is deadly serious.

We jump ahead to gameplay, and Bullock expertly scans the environment, fires off missiles and various guns, and frequently redirects the four other mechs with him. This experience involves issuing orders from a radial menu mid-combat or zooming into the sky without interrupting gameplay for an overhead view called the Battle Grid to make more specific orders. In this demo and for single-player, the other mechs are controlled by A.I., but up to four other friends will be able to control those mechs with you in the final game. Clans is exclusively a co-op game – you will have to play other MechWarrior games to play competitively.

The demo ends with a bad guy named Helmar Valasek showing up and executing an impressive explosion in the distance that sends a powerful shockwave through the desert environment. Reminiscent of Star Fox, Valasek calls you with a talking head video feed on your HUD to taunt you as the explosion rings through the environment.

The story is a focus for Clans, but prior knowledge is not required. Bullock says features like improved controls (the team is paying particular attention to using a controller) make it arguably the most accessible MechWarrior game to date. "These characters are very much – at the start of the game – cadets," narrative director Chris Lowrey says. "They themselves are new to the universe with the idea that they are coming into their own and getting thrown into the deep end." Piranha Games is clearly hopeful new players and, eventually, fans will be willing to jump into the pool just like the new cadets. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action (2 to 5-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Piranha Games Inc. **DEVELOPER** Piranha Games Inc. **RELEASE** 2024



TOPSPIN 2K25

Stepping back onto the court

In the early 2000s, tennis video games were everywhere. One of the most beloved of this era was 2003's Top Spin, which started as an Xbox exclusive before making the leap to PS2 and PC in subsequent years. Since that inaugural game, Top Spin has received three more numbered entries, all receiving high review scores. Unfortunately, the franchise has been dormant for over a decade. Thankfully, the series is finally poised to step up to the baseline once again with TopSpin 2K25, the first new title in more than 13 years.

As with all sports, tennis has evolved since the last Top Spin game, and developer Hangar 13 is focusing on the idea of "bridging the gap" between the legends of yesteryear and the young guns of tomorrow. As such, the standard edition box art features two of the greatest ever to do it, Serena Williams and Roger Federer, while the deluxe edition includes some of the younger stars like Frances Tiafoe, Iga Świątek, and Carlos Alcaraz. But that philosophy also carries forward into the development team's approach to the gameplay, which accommodates the more physical game that exists in 2024.

To help balance the newly tuned shot types, this fifth entry introduces a timing meter on every shot. To this point, the series has provided feedback on whether you timed it too early or late, but now, you'll know exactly what happened. In my hands-on session, it took me a few matches to get the hang of the timing meter – I was incredibly distracted by it at first – but once I got used to it, it felt like second nature and went a long way to making sure I was fully informed on when I should make contact with an incoming ball. TopSpin 2K25 also adjusts to have fewer unforced errors occur and makes it easier to hit winners during rallies.

For those unfamiliar with the game of tennis or just want to familiarize themselves with the series, TopSpin 2K25 includes TopSpin Academy, which features voiceover by legendary player John McEnroe. Here, you learn the basics of tennis, can take more advanced lessons, and even learn how to play in different play styles, meaning you can develop your skills as a baseline offense player or a serve-and-volley savant.

TopSpin 2K25 features more than 24 tennis players to choose from, each with their own signature animations and play styles. Across several matches during my hands-on session, I could truly feel the difference between the various players. Baseline players like Andre Agassi and Serena Williams kept me running back and forth during long rallies, while the serve-and-volley play style of John McEnroe gave me fits until I solved the puzzle of how to counter him.

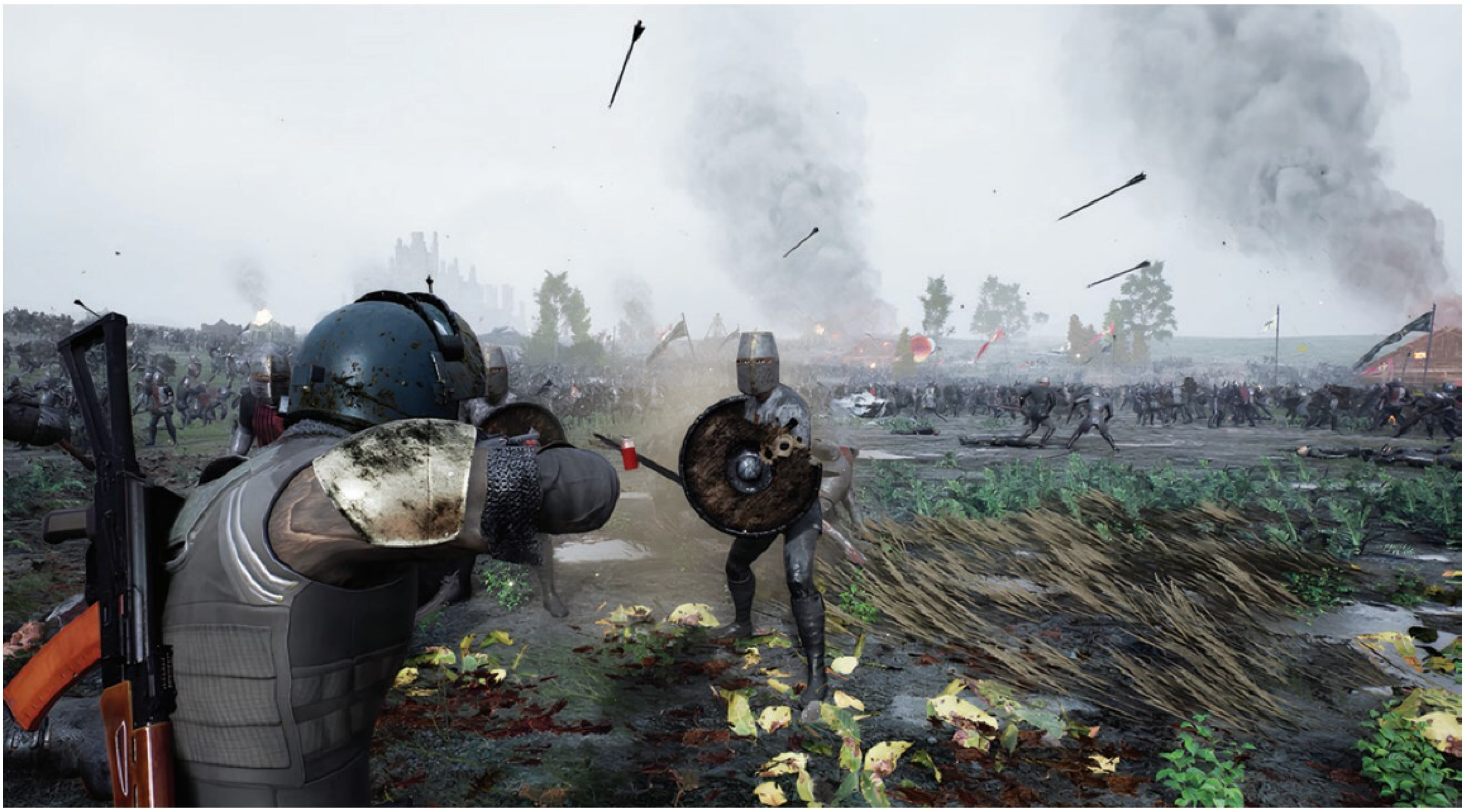
This is particularly true when I played as Frances Tiafoe against McEnroe in a tense three-set match on hard difficulty, and that ultimately ended up being the most fun I had in my hours playing. In this early stage, I can't even imagine how tricky the newly added Legend difficulty will be, but I plan on making that setting my home once I have more time with the game.

Outside of TopSpin Academy and Exhibition, players can build a player from the ground up in MyPlayer. While this career mode was not available in the demo build, the developers gave me an idea of what to expect from the create-a-player. Players can experiment with in-depth customization options, including hair, individual facial features, body type, accessories, animations, and even grunt types.

The developers also shared that Season Passes will play a part in this, but I'm hopeful that if those Season Passes do, in fact, involve microtransactions, the monetization in career mode will stop there. However, with 2K's aggressive use of them in the NBA 2K series' MyPlayer, as well as the mention of VC, the primary driver of NBA 2K's microtransactions, as a "MyPlayer Boost" bonus for the deluxe edition of TopSpin 2K25, I worry this hope is misplaced.

Regardless of those monetization anxieties, I had a blast with my time playing TopSpin 2K25. The game looks good in motion and feels even better during those long rallies. Those eager to play a new tennis game don't have long to wait. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Sports (4-Player Online)
PUBLISHER 2K **DEVELOPER** Hangar 13 **RELEASE** April 26



KINGMAKERS

Historically accurate absurdity

If you haven't seen the trailer for Kingmakers, I encourage you to watch it now before continuing. If you have, or perhaps you are reading this magazine in an effort to limit screen time (you're doing great, and we appreciate your support), I can't continue to talk about the game without spoiling its major twist. The trailer teases what appears to be a medieval strategy game with base-building elements before a contemporary, but admittedly junky truck screams through time to arrive in the middle of a battlefield brimming with horses, suits of armor, and presumably the shouting of old English phrases, but it's difficult to hear through the chaos.

What follows is something closer to Dynasty Warriors, where one man with modern weapon technology like guns and missile launchers wages war against armies of the past. The premise is immediately enticing, bizarre, and funny, but Kingmakers' creators, brothers Ian and Paul Fisch, are taking a surprisingly grounded approach to its game while fully embracing the absurd but compelling idea.

"The plot is important, especially when it comes to the historical accuracy," Ian says. "It's not just a generic medieval setting. You're in the 15th century. You're fighting against Henry Bolingbrook – Henry IV – and his son, Henry V." This came as a shock to me because after watching the trailer, I fully assumed Kingmakers was a tongue-in-cheek action game about fighting medieval soldiers with modern weaponry, and while that is certainly the case, Ian is clearly passionate about history. He spends the next few minutes of our interview talking about that era of history, England's relationship with France at the time, and commiserating about how the 2018 Timothée Chalamet film *The King* and Shakespeare's *Henry V* both got the history wrong. "Ian likes to history-nerd out and go really deep," Paul says. "We do try to keep this accurate lore, and then you intervene. Then the idea is that – you know – you're altering history."

And that historical intervention will apparently offer different outcomes. "The game has many endings," Paul confirms. The trailer does not go deep into the game's story, which is by design. The Fischs did not want to bog down potential players with lore in that first look. "I don't think a trailer should start naming a bunch of proper nouns and places and characters," Ian says. But for those who do dive into Kingmakers when it releases, the story will be a driving force.

Despite the action of fighting medieval armies with modern weaponry, you will not be playing as a trained soldier. Instead, you are a member of a team of scientists who are trying to figure out what in the past led to the current-day apocalypse. Your team has invented a time machine that lets them see the world shift and change around them due to decisions made in the past. They learn they must unite England, Wales, Scotland, and "a little bit of Ireland," as Ian phrases it, to prevent a terrible future. You're not an army with an unlimited government budget – you're a scientist trying to prevent present-day calamity.

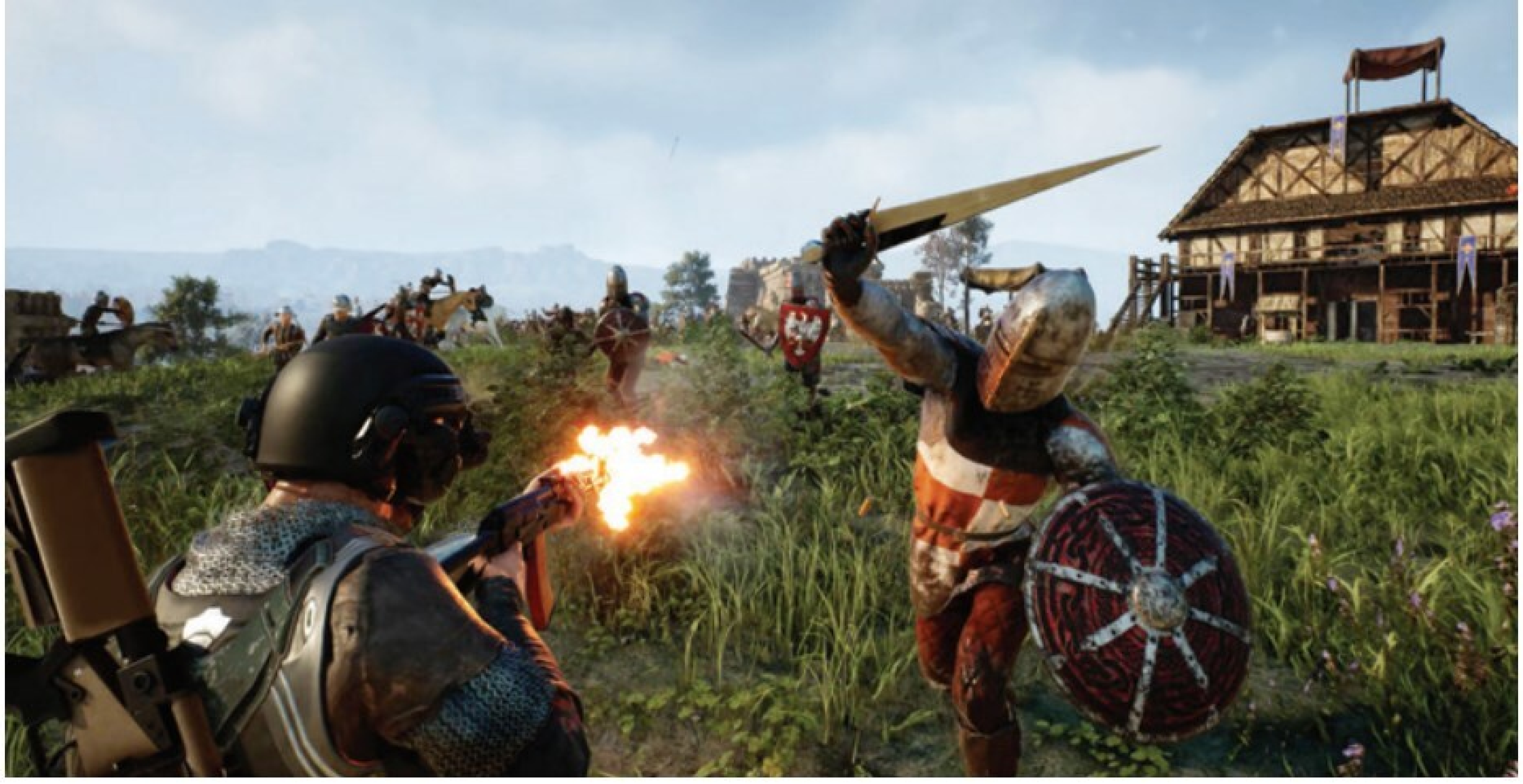
And it is possible to fail, or at least arrive at a very confusing finale. The trailer offers a tease of what appears to be an optimistic outcome in a futuristic city with cat-shaped floating ships, but everything is not as it seems. "If you pay close attention at the end, you'll see that that cat-ship opens up and just rains down human skulls and other bones. So, it's not exactly optimistic," Ian says.

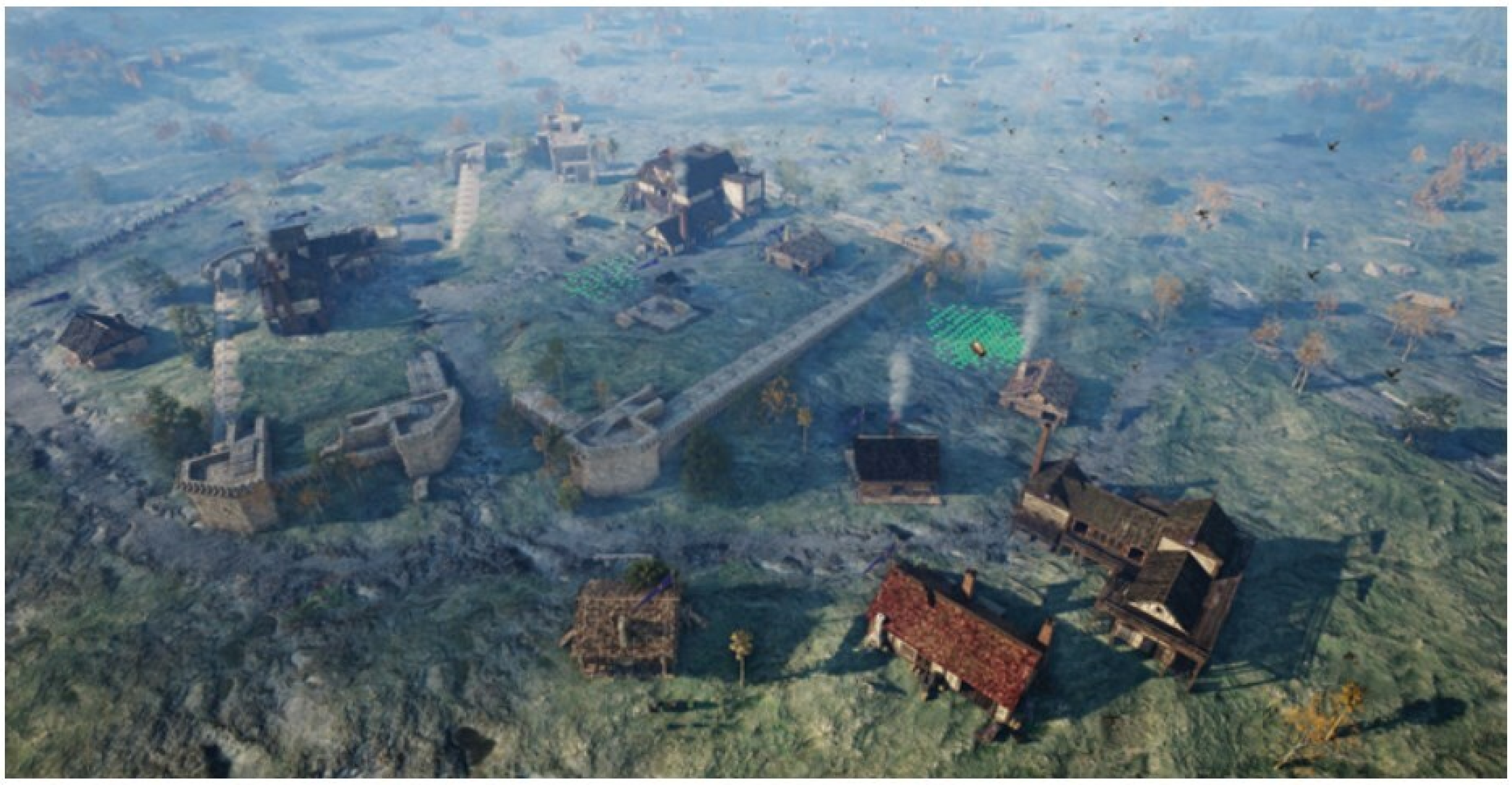
The story was the unexpected element of Kingmakers that drove my conversation with the Fisch brothers, but the duo and their team are also passionate about making a compelling action game with unique mechanics. As the time-traveling scientist, you will be jumping into the middle of the fray, but you will also be building defendable bases and commanding your army. So, alongside firing guns and driving trucks through swaths of soldiers, you will also be issuing orders, and doing it all with others online if you so choose. You will be able to assist your friends with their ongoing campaigns, and they can do the same for you. While specific details about how multiplayer will work are still being locked in, the Fisch brothers make it clear they want it all to be jump-in-jump-out.

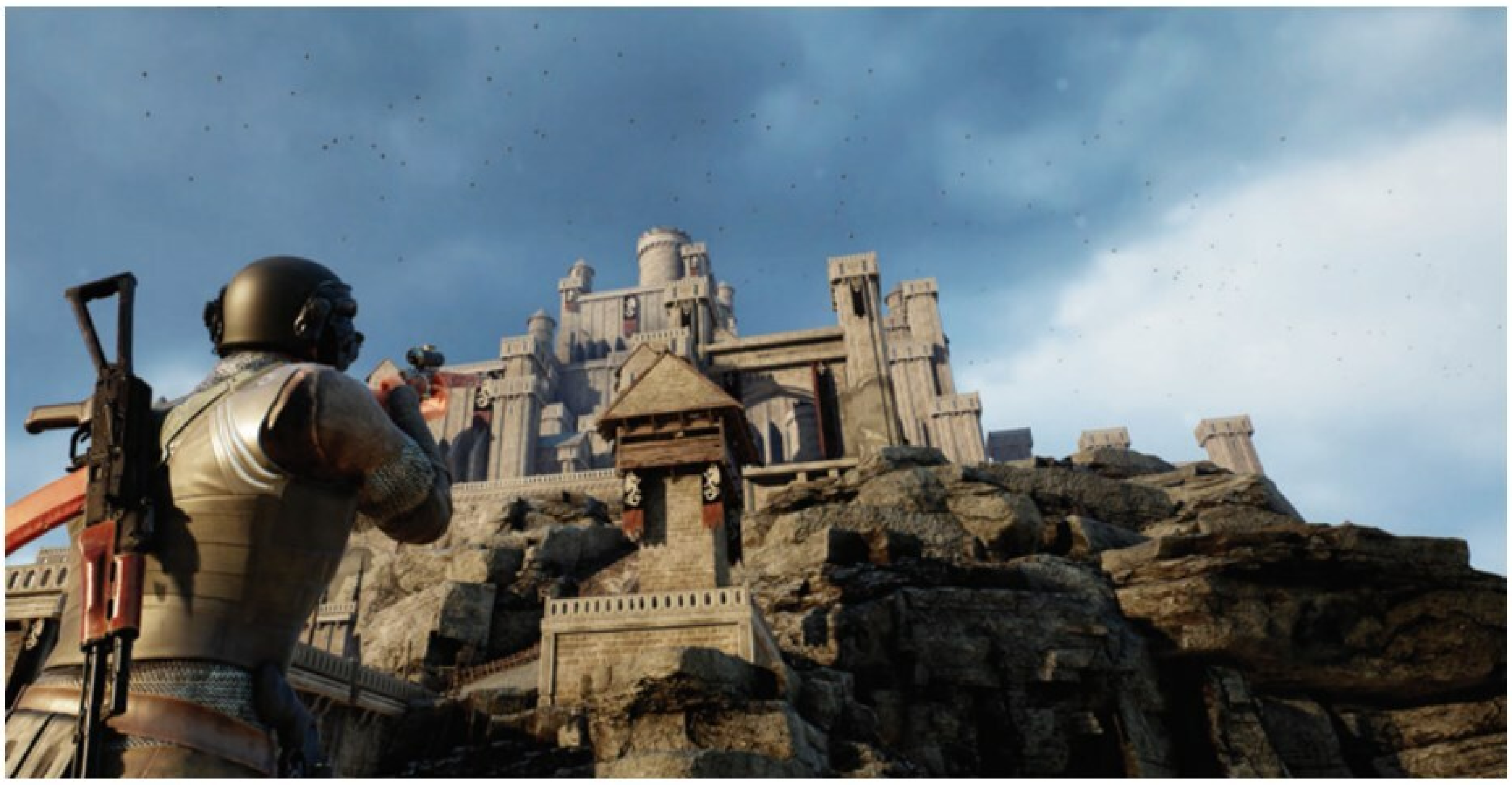
"It's a third-person, but it's also simulation?" Paul says, not ready to fully commit to a specific genre. "It doesn't have to be these narrow genres because people like lots of genres, and they want to see interesting matchups of those genres," Ian says. Kingmakers enters Early Access later this year, which will be our chance to see exactly what this unusual game really is.

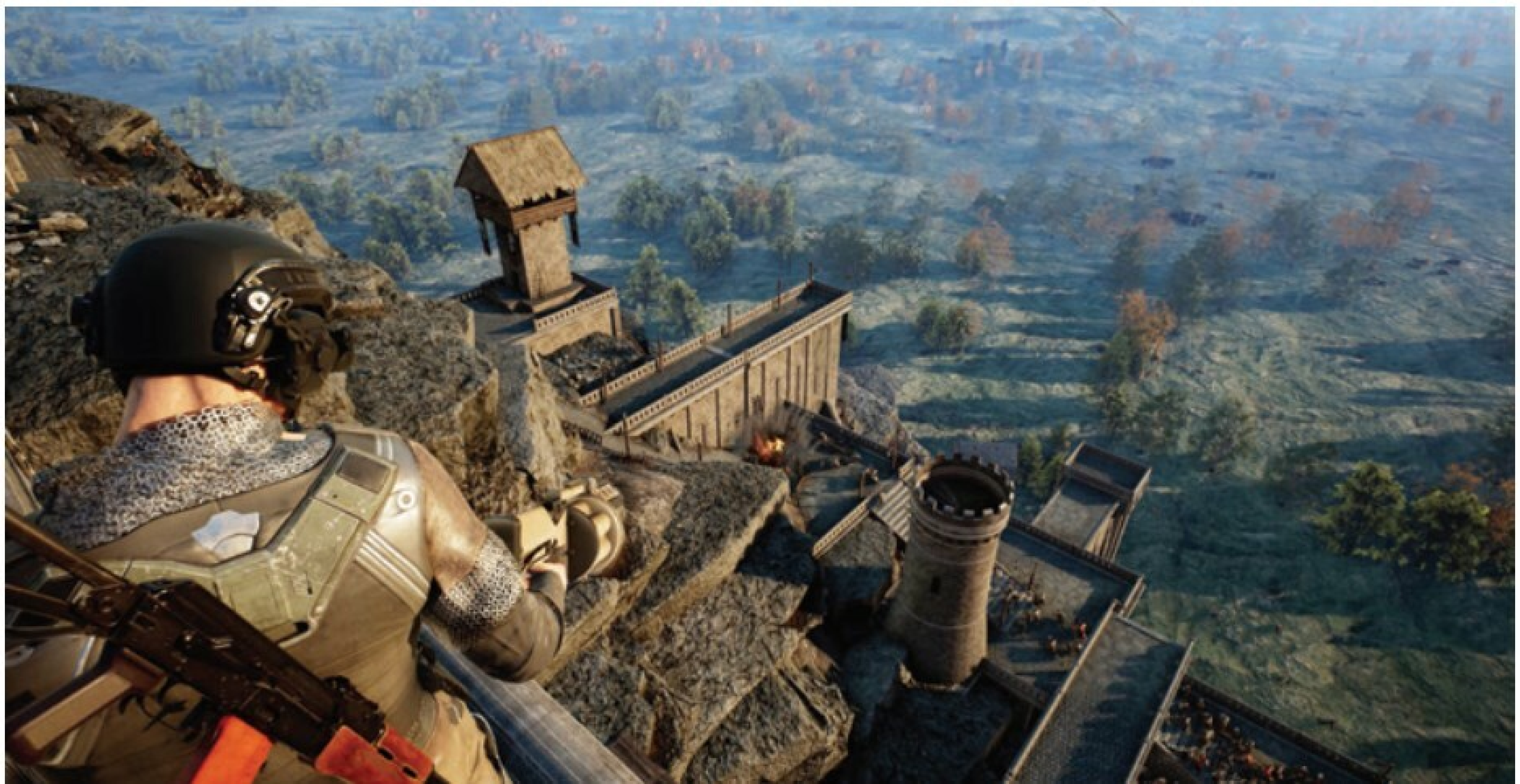
BY KYLE HILLIARD

PLATFORM PC
STYLE 1-Player Action (Multiplayer TBD)
PUBLISHER Tinybuild
DEVELOPER Redemption Road
RELEASE 2024 (Early Access)









FATAL FURY: CITY OF THE WOLVES

Revving up an old engine

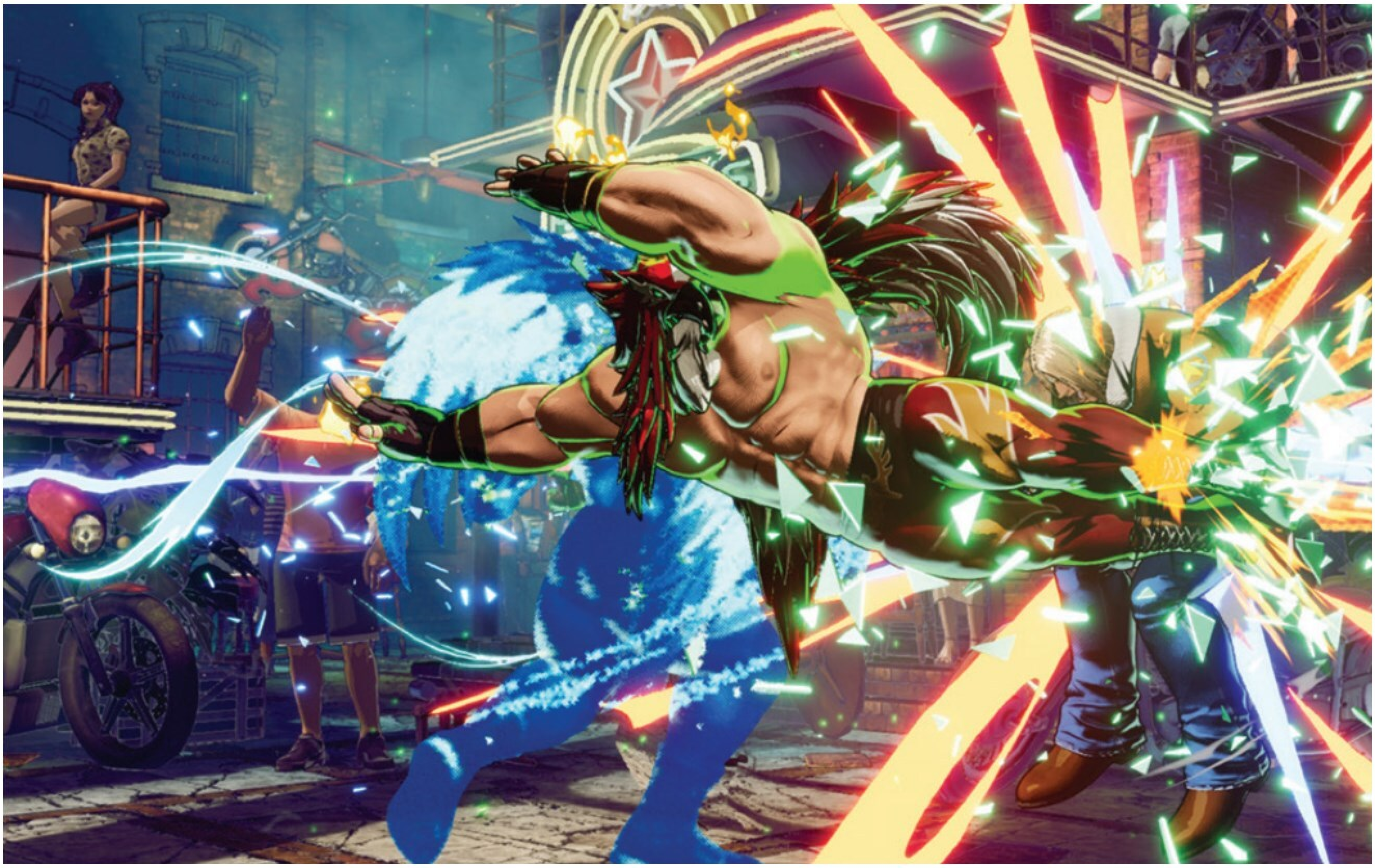
An entire generation of fighting game fans have been born, hit puberty, graduated college, found a career, and possibly started a family in the time between the last Fatal Fury game and the upcoming City of the Wolves. The last entry, Garou: Mark of the Wolves, was released in 1999 for arcades (and 2001 for Dreamcast in the West), meaning the series has been dormant for over 25 years. Fatal Fury: City of the Wolves sees the series make its long-awaited return, and it already feels ready to stand back alongside the big boys of the genre.

I had a chance to play over an hour of City of the Wolves at the SNK World Championship Finals where I also spoke with director Hayato Konya. Fatal Fury has been an arcade mainstay since 1991 but hasn't quite created the mainstream footprint of Street Fighter and Mortal Kombat. With this new entry, Konya says he hopes the series' penchant for more technical fighting, along with modern revisions to fan-favorite systems, will help it stand out in the now crowded space while also appealing to younger fighting game players who may only know Fatal Fury by name.

You eat with your eyes first, and City of the Wolves looks sharp thanks to a stylized art direction, with bold, heavy shadows that give the game a vibrant comic-book-like look reminiscent of Marvel vs Capcom 3. The returning fighters available in my demo were Rock Howard, Terry Bogard, Hotaru Futaba, and Tizoc. I also got to try a new character named Preecha. This bespectacled, bubble-gum-haired young woman is a quirky but brilliant scientist. She's also the Muay Thai pupil of series clown Joe Higashi. Interestingly, she's more interested in finding scientific explanations for how her rivals can perform seemingly impossible moves, like shooting fire or energy out of their fists.

I enjoyed using Preecha the most, but each character is fun, whether you're German suplexing foes as the masked wrestler Tizoc or firing uppercut blasts as Rock. In addition to looking cool, the roster speaks to a broader audience thanks to a new English localization.

The REV system serves as City of the Wolves' big new addition, giving players enhanced attacks to bolster their offense. REV Blows are powerful, near unblockable supercharged attacks, REV Guard serves as an enhanced block, REV Arts are flashy cinematic combo attacks, while REV Accel is a speedy assault of sorts. Using these moves gradually fills the constantly draining REV meter, but it replenishes when you land attacks.



However, filling the meter sends the fighter into an overheated state, rendering REV moves unavailable until they "cool off" and the meter empties. It's an interesting system that kept me from relying on REV moves too often, lest I lose them entirely and give my opponent a window to unleash their own REV-based offense.

The T.O.P system from Mark of the Wolves returns in expanded form as the S.P.G. (Selective Potential Gear) bar. At the start of each fight, players choose to place this bar at the front, middle, or end of the health meter. When your HP falls within the S.P.G. section, you gain benefits such as increased attack power, the ability to unleash REV Blows, and health regen. Thus, the placement of the S.G.P. matters. Are you an aggressive player from the jump? Place the S.G.B bar at the front so you begin the match at your strongest. Or you could place it at the end to act as a powerful last stand. I enjoy the strategy the S.G.B. bar brings, both for myself and for knowing when to turn up the heat when my opponent's vitality approaches theirs.

These systems complement a fighting system that already feels very fine-tuned this far from release. Playing matches against A.I. and other journalists was a challenging blast. I loved unleashing Combination attacks while leveraging my REV meter. You can also execute Feints, special fake-out moves to trick your opponent into attacking or begging off. Returning mechanics, like Just Defend, in which you block at the last second for a quicker recovery, add to the game's enjoyable technical-based combat. Add in the streamlined control scheme called Smart Style to complement the veteran-centric Arcade-style, and any player can hop into City of the Wolves.

I've never been the most enthusiastic Fatal Fury fan in the world, but I'm impressed with how thrilling City of the Wolves is, especially this far from release. SNK has a promising start, and while Konya wasn't ready to divulge details on other modes and features, the core one-on-one fighting is in a strong place. Fighting game fans have feasted well the last few years, and Fatal Fury: City of the Wolves looks to offer another delicious course in early 2025.

BY MARCUS STEWART

PLATFORM TBA **STYLE** 1 or 2-Player Fighting
PUBLISHER SNK **DEVELOPER** SNK
RELEASE 2025

YOU'VE EXPLORED WORLDS,
NOW CREATE THEM
University of Advancing Technology
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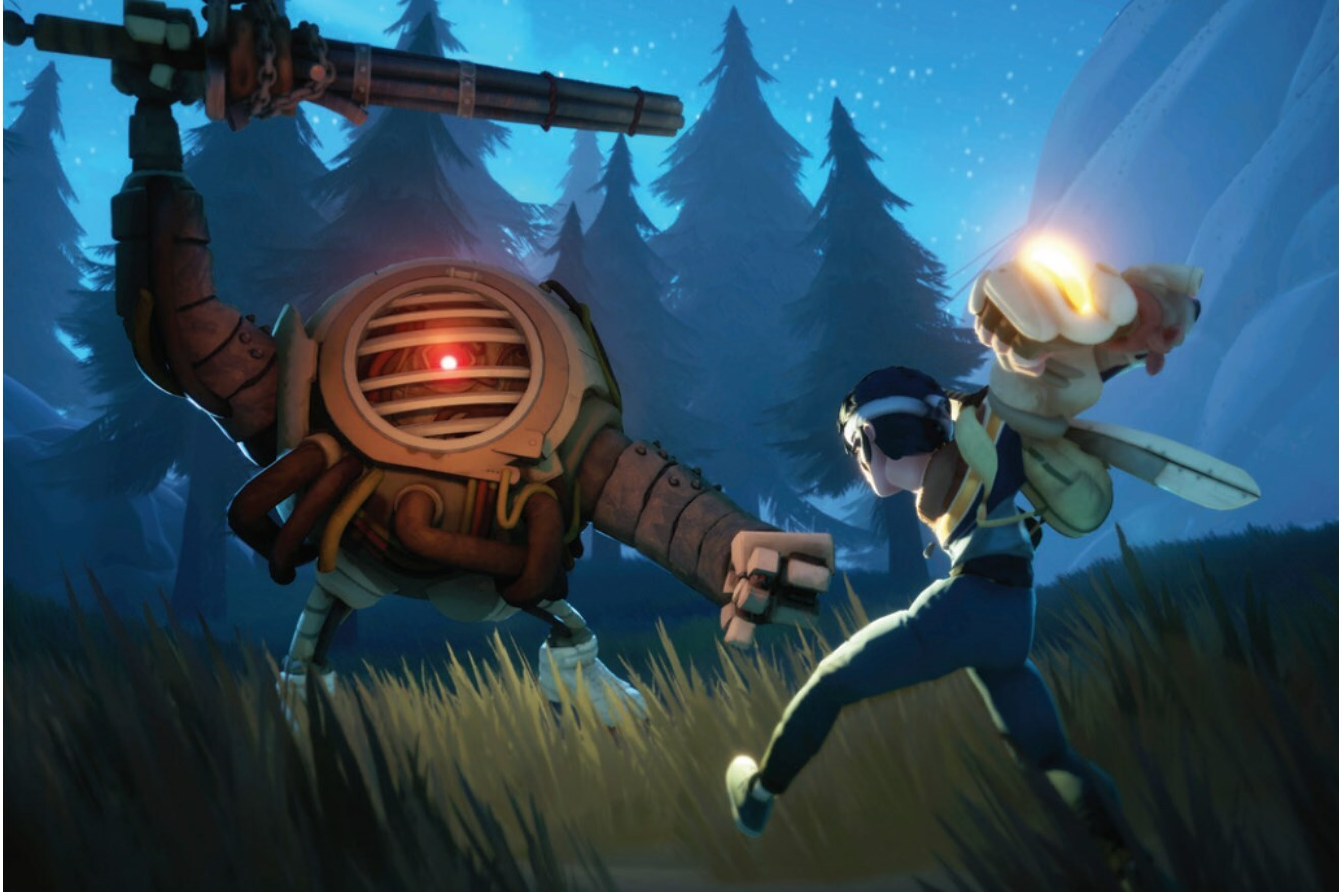
/GAA BA GAME ART AND ANIMATION
/GD BA GAME DESIGN
/GPM MS GAME PRODUCTION AND MANAGEMENT
/GP BS GAME PROGRAMMING



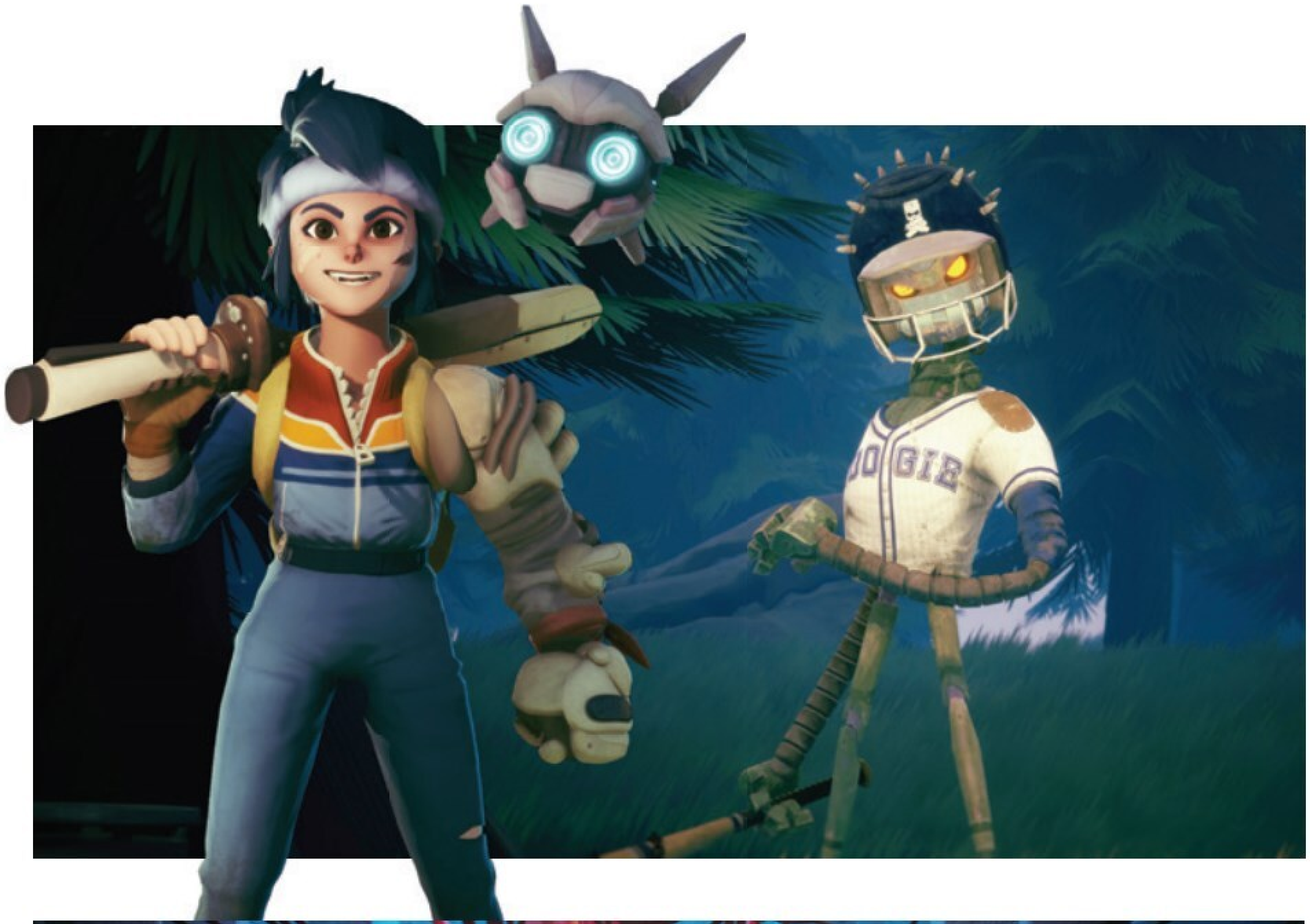
ROBOTS AT MIDNIGHT

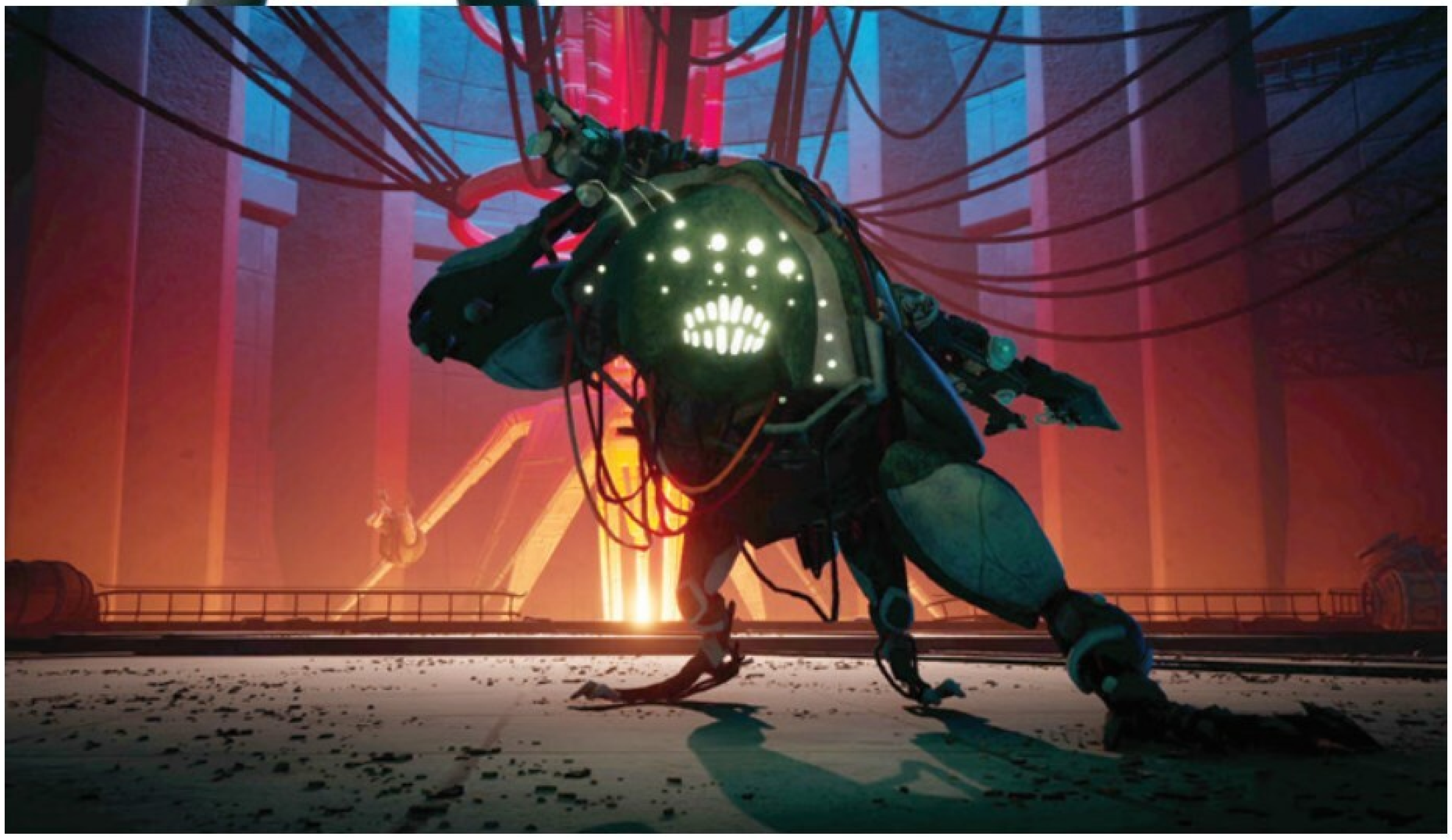
Committing to the MITT

When developers work on games for long enough, it's not uncommon for them to want to stretch their wings and try new things. After all, video games are complicated products that require years of coordination and effort to pull together – it's no wonder people would want a little variety if they're doing it multiple times. At indie studio Finish Line Games, every game is different from the last, and no game is as new – or as daunting – as its next title, Robots at Midnight.

You play as Zoe, a young girl stranded on the planet of Yob after stowing away in a food container to see her dad. Normally, that shouldn't be a problem since Yob is supposed to be a man-made paradise of sorts, but when Zoe emerges into the world, she finds it in a state of ruin, infested with hostile robots. Her ultimate goal is to find her dad, but to do that she'll need to defend herself, which is where the game's combat comes in.

Though the team doesn't outright call it a Soulslike, the inspiration is clear. Attacks are slow and deliberate, dodges and parries are crucial mechanics, and animation is king – predicting when and where a foe's swing will land can be the difference between life and death. When I jump into combat for the first time, I'm surprised how intuitive it is to fight. Then I realize the control scheme is almost identical to Lies of P, a game I played just a few weeks earlier. That said, I'm rusty; some rogue robots catch me off guard before I have a chance to learn their attack patterns. For the demo, the developers (graciously) heal me mid-fight, and I learn not to underestimate even the most basic enemies.





Robots At Midnight aims to deviate from the Souls label in key ways. The first way is with the MITT, Zoe's mechanical gauntlet. It drastically increases the player's mobility, allowing you to dash across fields and zip toward enemies to stun them. Progress through the story and you unlock upgrades for combat and traversal, lending the game a faster pace than you'd otherwise expect. I never got the hang of the MITT in my hands-on session, but I blame that on my lack of playtime over how it felt to use it. I look forward to spending more time with the mechanic and seeing how effectively it shakes up the combat.

The other deviation the game makes is in its tone. You play as a kid stranded on a world with violent robots, but they're goofy violent robots. Humor is at the forefront of Finish Line's collective minds as it writes the moment-to-moment stories in the game. It specifically wants to play it up here to contrast the brutal combat system. Robots at Midnight is unlike any game Finish Line has made, but in this way, it's like coming home for the team – tongue-in-cheek satirical comedy is its bread and butter.

The game also aesthetically clashes with the Souls genre, blending a fun, cartoony art style that's likely to attract younger players with chunky retro sci-fi designs to appeal to older players. The team frequently uses the term "cassette futurism," an art style inspired by the science fiction of the '70s and '80s, to describe its world and robot design. This creates a game that looks like a classic Saturday morning cartoon, complete with a cute sidekick and characters begging to be made into action figures.

One of the bosses shown, separate from my guided demo area, is the best encapsulation of this dynamic. Armed with a jersey and a baseball bat is Loogie, a mean-spirited machine that antagonizes the player with baseball-themed attacks. When you get hit by certain moves, he even taunts you, giving a real cartoon-bully vibe to his encounter, but when you hit him back, he ragdolls to the ground in a limp, ungraceful tumble. It's a lot of personality to inject into what seems like an otherwise minor boss encounter, which has me looking forward to what other bosses have in store.

As much as Loogie leans into the humor of the game, the final boss of my demo, Abomination, Havoc of the Reactor, leans into its dark dystopian spirit. You can always tell a boss means business when it comes with a subtitle, and Abomination is no different. Right as I get comfortable with the game's light-hearted tone, Finish Line reveals just how grotesque its monster design can be. An unholy amalgamation of scrap metal and wires, he's deceptively nimble, skittering up the walls and swinging his massive arms at Zoe with startling force. After some well-timed parries and a few dozen slashes from my handy propeller blade, the beast is slain, and my demo comes to a close.

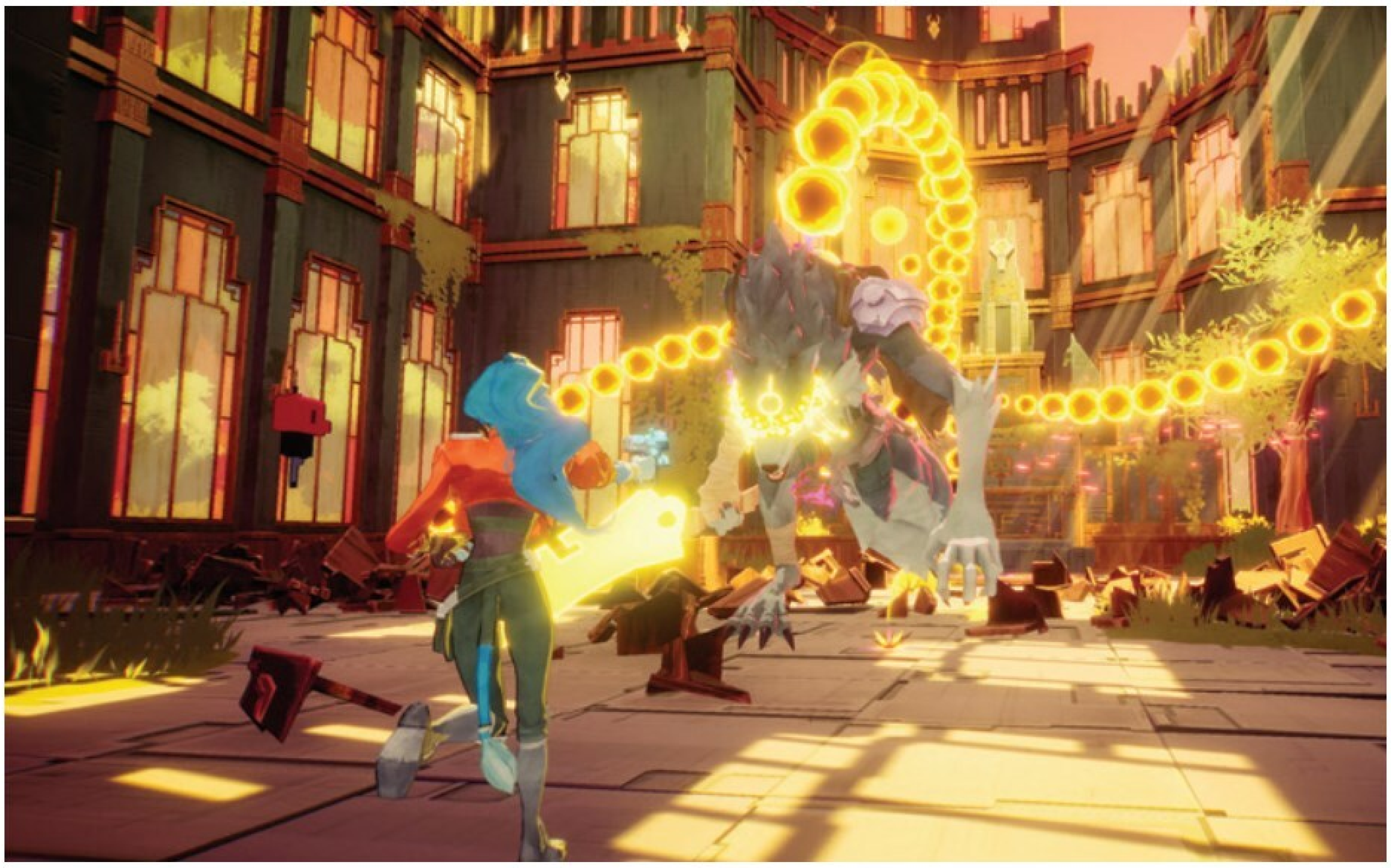
Robots At Midnight combines several seemingly contradictory ideas. It has the structure of an intense action game with nostalgia for the science fiction of decades past. It aims to be old and new, silly and brutal, and all from a studio that's never done anything like it. It's a gamble, and I'm eager to see if it pays off when the game launches later this year.

BY CHARLES HARTE

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Finish Line Games **DEVELOPER** Finish Line Games **RELEASE** 2024

HYPER LIGHT BREAKER

Drifter (sort of) revisited



In my review for 2016's Hyper Light Drifter, I wrote about how it was a game I created excuses to keep playing after seeing credits writing, "I didn't do it out of necessity; I did it because I wanted to stay in Hyper Light Drifter's world for as long as possible." I love the color, style, music, and overall vibe of that game, which is why I was so excited to finally go hands-on with its not-quite-a-sequel, Breaker, and finally have an excuse to exist in that world again.

"It's not a sequel – it is just in the world of Hyper Light. It will have common threads, themes, and shared components," director Alx Preston says. "If you played Drifter, you will see reappearing species and enemies and other stuff like that, but generally, you don't have to play Drifter to enjoy this. The story is encapsulated in its own way. But there are connections to it for sure." Preston is even more ambiguous about its Drifter relationship when asked specific questions about the timeline saying, "It takes place not too far away from Dirfter on either end. It's not like it's taking place 1,000 years later. It's within a range of the events of Drifter."

Breaker retains the mood of Drifter, and its sound, though Preston says returning composer Disasterpiece was mainly only involved in the beginning, but it does overall look and feel different. Breaker is a 3D action game, and I make my way through a few short runs while Preston watches and politely congratulates me on lasting longer than most. There is a quick dash for general movement and a separate combat dash for closing the gap between enemies. I found little use for it in my short time, but you can also pull out a hoverboard to move quickly over longer stretches and use a glider to prevent fall damage when jumping from high heights. Expectedly, considering developer Heart Machine's action history, it feels good, and though I died quickly, I can already see the opportunities for skill improvement.

In my first run, I used a personal favorite, dual swords and a pistol, and for my second run, I used a single sword and something close to a machine gun. You can mix and match weapons as you progress, which I am thankful for as I would love to take the machine gun with the dual swords.

At the end of my playtime, I took on a boss named Dro. The gigantic wolflike creature with a big glowing yellow sword introduced himself by jumping into the arena with strange, staccato animation. It was as if he was intentionally leaving out frames, and it looked awesome. I didn't get to see much else of him, though, because he killed me almost immediately. After leaping over a few expanding yellow attack circles on the ground, I got in about two hits before losing all my health. Preston was still polite about my run but did not offer the same compliment about how long I lasted compared to when I was out in the world.

"It's going to be a thing where I have to figure out what to call it," Preston says with a chuckle when I ask if the game should be considered a proper roguelike. "It has roguelike elements for sure, but it's also an open world with extraction elements. You can go on runs and death matters, but it's on a different scale than a normal roguelike."

You attempt runs in Breaker, and there are randomized open worlds, but you set your schedule for how you want to approach them. You have a limited time and attempts to go through a world and defeat its three bosses. If you fail you get a new world, but success also leads to a new world. There is also some agency in when you leave a given world with your earned assets, which Preston says almost makes it feel more like an extraction game. It's a mechanic that will undoubtedly make more sense in practice but is difficult to perceive with just a few runs, not to mention developer tools to automatically transport you to Dro so he can immediately murder you.

Hyper Light Breaker is planned for Early Access this summer with the 1.0 release marking its console release. Preston, a Steam Deck fan, considers that platform a priority if for no one else but himself and offers a "never say never" response when asked about Switch. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PC (Consoles TBA)
STYLE 1 to 3-Player Action
PUBLISHER Gearbox Publishing
DEVELOPER Heart Machine
RELEASE Summer (Early Access)

ELDEN RING: SHADOW OF THE ERDTREE

Return, ye Tarnished

If you're like me, two years ago, at this exact moment, you were probably sitting on a couch or in front of a monitor surpassing hour 100 of From Software's action masterpiece, Elden Ring. Released on February 25, 2022, it was a game I could not put down – something I hadn't felt since 2017's The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild. I am both wildly excited and terrified for what my life will become this June when Elden Ring's Shadow of the Erdtree expansion launches.

"In the Land of Shadow, Miquella awaits the return of his promised lord."

That's our premise, immediately setting the stage for a new adventure not in The Lands Between but somewhere else: The Land of Shadow. The official gameplay reveal trailer for Shadow of the Erdtree demonstrates how massive this expansion will be; if I didn't know any better, I could be sold on the idea that this is an entirely new From Software game. Save for the trailer's opening, which begins with a look at Miquella in the strange egg in Mohgwyn's Palace, everything else is new – enemies, locations, and, of course, bosses.

Centered around the aforementioned Miquella, who is brother to the ultra-difficult boss, Malenia, Blade of Miquella, it seems From Software is finally going to reveal what happened to Miquella and why he's a background character in the base game, rather than one we fight or interact with in a big way. We know little about this brother – the community has deciphered, through item and in-game lore, that Miquella has stripped himself of flesh and seemingly his god-like heritage as an Empyrean (and more importantly, part of the Golden Order) to travel to the Land of Shadow.

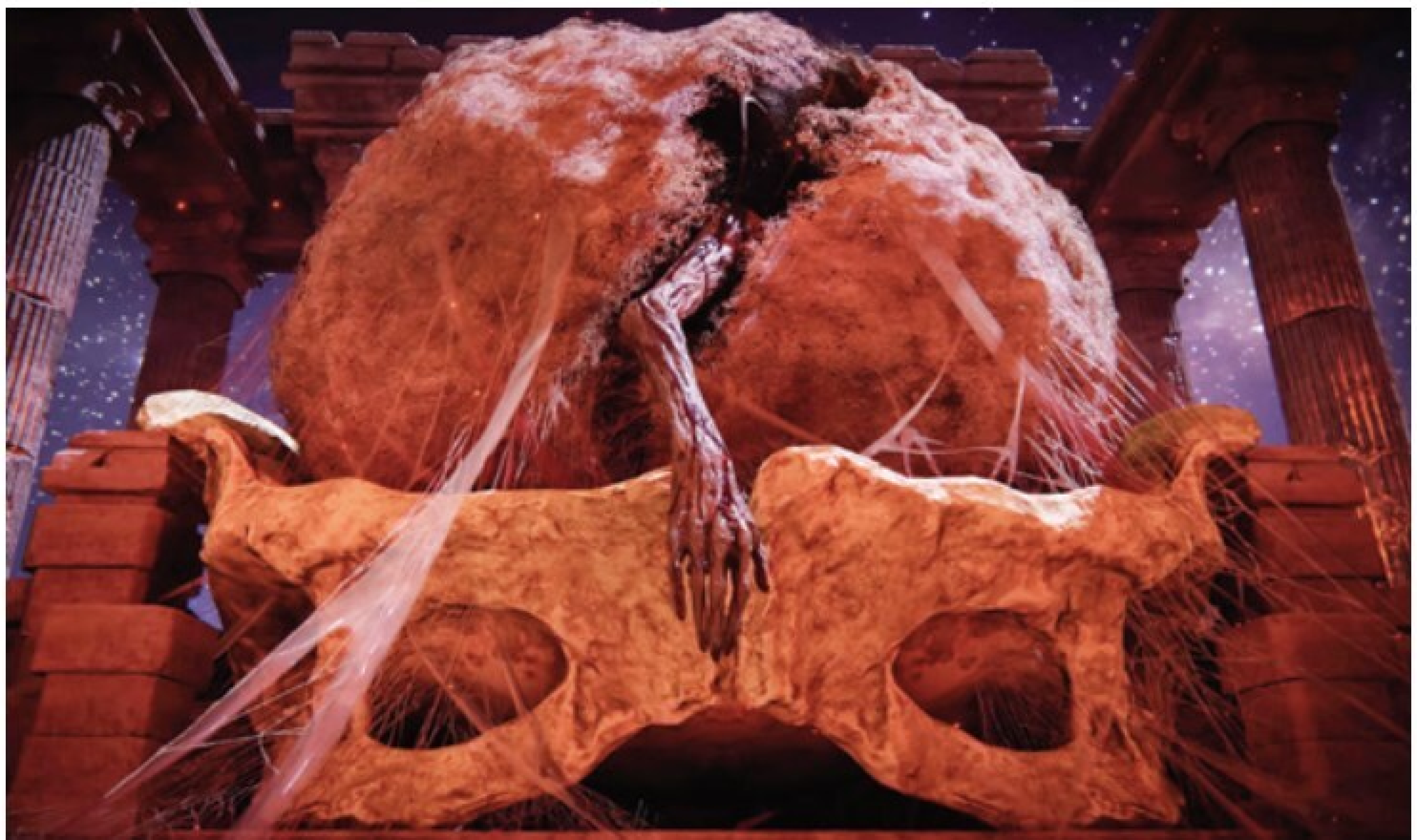
Unseen and unreachable in The Lands Between, the community speculates this mysterious location has been right under our noses this entire time – that ample blank space covered in cloud in the center of the Elden Ring map, obscured by the Erdtee. Perhaps after interacting with the fleshy arm of Miquella inside that egg, players will be transported to the Land of Shadow to track down and fight this forgotten warrior. If he's anything like his sister, we're in for our hardest From Software challenge yet.

New additions in Shadow of the Erdtree include unarmed hand combat, allowing us to simply beat down the game's most formidable foes with stylish spin kicks and more, an even bigger fire giant, a machine-gun crossbow, angry hippos, an all-neck creature ready to suck our souls away, a parade-like lion boss that looks terrifyingly difficult, and a snake woman that might be the penultimate boss of the expansion (if not the final one). And that's just a quick glance at what's revealed in this trailer – there's also new equipment, weapon skills, magic spells, and more.

Throughout the trailer, From Software's mastery of art and audio is on full display. Unsurprisingly, the Land of Shadow looks gorgeous – terrifying and disgusting, but gorgeous – and the score that plays throughout the gameplay reveal trailer brings as much excitement to the game as the main theme of Elden Ring.

While we don't know what to expect entirely from Shadow of the Erdtree, it looks like From Software's most significant expansion ever, complete with a $39.99 price tag and a brand-new Collector's Edition, too. If you haven't yet rolled credits on Elden Ring, you need to do so before jumping into this expansion. Fortunately, you have until June 21 when Shadow of the Edtree launches. Rise, ye Tarnished, our return is almost upon us. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing (3-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Bandai Namco **DEVELOPER** From Software **RELEASE** June 21



UNKNOWN 9: AWAKENING

Unknown no longer

Announced at Gamescom 2020, Unknown 9: Awakening hasn't had much in the way of news since its reveal. That promising trailer gave us a basic idea of what the game, which is a small part of a multimedia franchise, is going for, but beyond the basic premise laid out by the series, we haven't learned anything new about the game in quite some time. However, I recently had the chance to meet with publisher Bandai Namco and developer Reflector Entertainment to learn more about the game and see the first gameplay footage.

As a multimedia franchise, the story of Unknown 9 follows the story of the Quaestors – powerful people who are keyed into the way the universe works – which folds out across various platforms.

This preview specifically talks about the game, but the story unfolds across media like comics, a novel trilogy, a podcast, a web series, blog posts, and the game. However, Reflector designed the story of Unknown 9: Awakening to be a self-contained experience that anyone can enjoy. Still, if they feel compelled to dig deeper, they can do so through other media.

The Unknown 9 universe centers around empires' cyclical rise and fall across human history. As the next empire's end approached, nine individuals with a strong connection to a mysterious hidden dimension known as The Fold were shielded from death. Those people joined the quest to try to break the cycle of destruction. Out of this premise, two separate groups formed with a shared goal: trying to learn the power of the 9. However, they want different things with the knowledge and power they seek. The Leap Year Society hopes to gain the knowledge of the 9 to tell it to humanity for their betterment. On the other side, the Ascendants want the knowledge and power of the 9 to break the cycle, then use the power for selfish means. As you might imagine, in Unknown 9: Awakening, the Leap Year Society is often painted as the good guys, while the Ascendants are the more antagonistic group.

Unknown 9: Awakening follows Haroona, a woman raised in the streets of Calcutta, India. Played by Anya Chalotra (Yennefer in Netflix's *The Witcher*), Haroona's powers awakened during her childhood. Now, as an adult, she's learning how to train her powers while on a mission for revenge against Vincent, a member of the Ascendants who killed her father.

The gameplay of Unknown 9 operates on three main pillars: Stepping, Combat, and Active Stealth. Stepping uses Haroona's unique powers, allowing her to

jump into the body of an NPC and control them. You start with one Step Token but can upgrade to four by the end of the game. When you take control, time pauses, and you map out their moves. For example, you can Step into one enemy and force them to drive their melee weapon into an explosive object in the environment to take out the three guards, then Step into another enemy and have them open fire on a couple of other nearby guards. Moves like these level the playing field for Haroona as she faces insurmountable odds on her quest.

Outside of Stepping, Haroona also has various other powers, including the ability to pull, push, and crush objects in the world. Using this, she can detonate objects or alarms to distract guards. She can also heal, use an Umbric Rock to distract enemies, don a cloak to turn invisible, and use her senses to see the locations of enemies and objectives. All of those allow Haroona to take out enemies craftily, but when things hit the fan, more straightforward methods come in handy; Haroona can also perform light and heavy melee attacks and use an Umbric Attack to stun enemies, and can block and dodge on the defensive side.

My demo takes place in Suknasari Forest, a location players will encounter in the first three hours of Unknown 9: Awakening. The minimal U.I. elements assist with immersion, showing just one single element in the lower left corner to tell you your health, Tokens, and powers. As you explore the environments, you find skill points within anomalies. Unknown 9: Awakening doesn't use a traditional XP system, instead relying on these anomalies – some of which are on the main path, some of which require exploration – to allow Haroona to unlock upgrades.

Across several sequences, I watch the developer giving the demo Step into the bodies of guards between Haroona and her objective. In some instances, Haroona forces the guard to kill other guards. Other times, the guard is compelled to run headfirst into an explosive. Stepping looks like a fun additional fold into traditional stealth gameplay.

Playing through the sequences stealthily, Haroona sneaks through the tall grass in typical stealth-game fashion, but her stealth takedowns are devastating in a way Assassin's Creed could never pull off; Haroona looks to be removing their souls from their bodies. Or maybe she's simply removing their consciousness and then putting it back using her added senses. Either way, it doesn't look like something I want done to me.

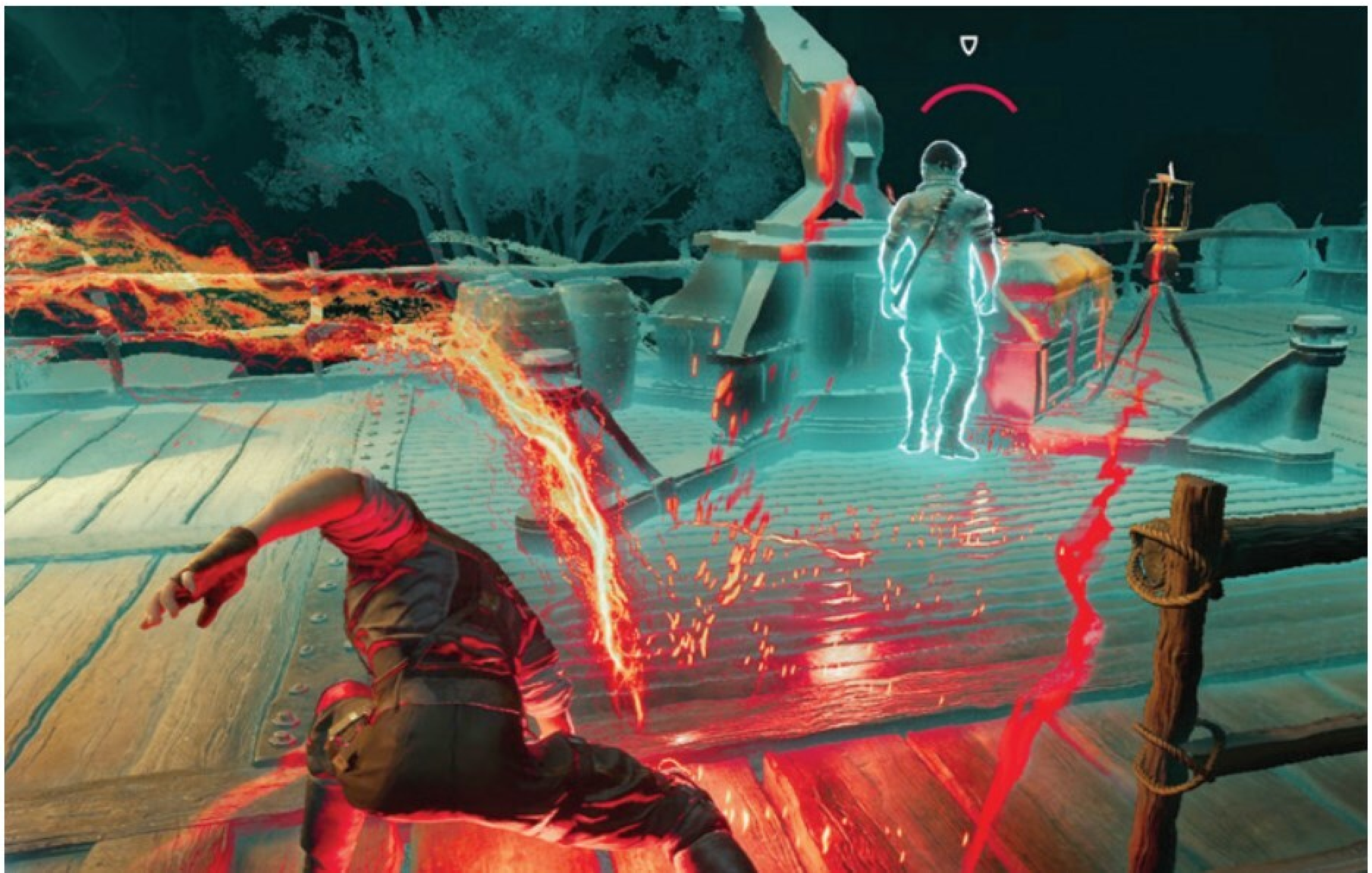
After a couple of sequences of smaller minion-type enemies, I watch the developer take on a tougher enemy. This brute blocks a lot, so standard melee attacks won't work as well. Instead, you must use Haroona's powers to Step into other enemies to attack environmental objects like lamps and explosive barrels. After dealing a good amount of damage to the heavy, Haroona finishes him off by pushing him into an explosive barrel, putting him down for good.

The demo ends with a segment where Haroona must steal an airship from Vincent. However, before infiltrating the hangar, she must remove the anchors that are keeping it grounded. After watching the developer battle through the first wave of enemies, he loosens the first anchor, which unleashes another wave of baddies. Some of these enemies are the standard melee guards, while others have high-powered rifles, and others still are the heavy-style foes from the previous encounter.

Each loosened anchor unleashes a new wave of enemies, and I delight in watching the developer playing the game show off how creative you can get with these encounters. After dropping a lamp on the last enemy's head and setting him ablaze, Haroona removes the final anchor. With that, the path to the airship is opened up, and the demo comes to a close.

While there's still so much we don't know about Unknown 9: Awakening, I liked what I saw. The universe is ripe for exciting storytelling, and the gameplay reminds me of a strong mix of Control, Uncharted, and Assassin's Creed. I'm sure we'll learn more in the lead-up to the launch, but for now, my interest is piqued. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Bandai Namco
DEVELOPER Reflector **RELEASE** Summer



KUNITSU-GAMI: PATH OF THE GODDESS

In Path of the Goddess, you are in charge of keeping a Japanese village safe from demons that encroach at night. The action is defined as "dancing swords," but you will also be strategizing and making decisions about what villagers you will take with you on your various journeys. You make battle preparations during the day to protect your Maiden and the village before the supernatural conflicts unfold at night. The game looks like a unique mix of disparate video game genres. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Capcom **DEVELOPER** Capcom **RELEASE** 2024

EMPIRE OF THE ANTS

Seemingly existing somewhere between Pikmin and a more traditional real-time strategy game, Empire of the Ants puts you in the role of the Ant Savior as they lead their clan to victory against the competing forces of nature. The game is based on Bernard Werber's 1991 novel of the same name and is not even the first video adaptation of the book. A PC game released in 2000. This latest version, however, features genuinely photo-realistic visuals. Hope you don't mind up-close views of terrifying spiders. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Strategy (Multiplayer TBD)
PUBLISHER Microids **DEVELOPER** Tower Five **RELEASE** 2024

TRICKY MADNESS

We certainly haven't been without snowboarding games since 2003's SSX3. That wasn't even the last SSX game, but it was the last one that arguably felt like a proper SSX game with heightened, colorful snowboarding antics. Developer Nathan Dearth is not shy about what they are making, saying simply on social media, "I'm making the spiritual successor to SSX." Details are light, like additional platforms or a specific release date, but we welcome the successor with open arms, and the gameplay so far looks promising. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Sports (Multiplayer TBD)
PUBLISHER Nathan Dearth **DEVELOPER** Nathan Dearth **RELEASE** 2025

RPG MAKER WITH

Reynolds
Pamela
Gordon
Matilda
Fight
Escape

The RPG Maker series is arguably the most efficiently named "game" in the medium. It is a tool that lets players make their own RPGs. The series has been around in Japan since the late '80s but has regularly made its way to North America across myriad platforms. The newest entry doesn't appear to have any significant surprises. It boasts user-friendly controls, all kinds of new assets to build your game with and will let you share your creations with others. It is coming to Switch first and will make its way to Sony platforms next year. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Simulation (Multiplayer TBD)
PUBLISHER NIS America **DEVELOPER** Gotcha Gotcha Games Inc.
RELEASE Fall 2024 (Switch), 2025 (PS5, PS4)

MARVEL 1943: RISE OF HYDRA

The new game from Uncharted creator and writer Amy Hennig has been teased for some time. We learned it would be a Marvel game many years ago, and then we learned it would be a Captain America and Black Panther game, but the most recent update has given the game its proper title and a look at its visuals. And they are impressive. The game follows Captain America and Black Panther Azzuri (grandfather of T'Challa) as they clash while pursuing a common goal: defeating Nazis. Despite the two protagonists (and additional playable characters), it will be a single-player adventure. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM TBA **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Skydance New Media **DEVELOPER** Skydance New Media **RELEASE** 2025

MARVEL RIVALS

Marvel Rivals offers 6v6 PvP action featuring arenas from across the Marvel Multiverse, including Asgard and Tokyo 2099. The title touts a deep roster of heroes and villains, including members of the Avengers, Guardians of the Galaxy, X-Men, and more, all with unique Team-Up skills that play off various synergies between heroes. The closed alpha in May will feature more than a dozen characters, while the announcement reveals 18 characters for the starting roster. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 12-Player Online Shooter
PUBLISHER NetEase Games **DEVELOPER** NetEase Games **RELEASE** TBA

MULTIVERSUS

You'd be forgiven for raising an eyebrow at seeing this game in our preview section. The game "released" in 2022 as a free-to-play Super Smash Bros.-inspired fighter with various Warner Bros. characters like Batman, Bugs Bunny, and Arya Stark from *Game of Thrones*. It had paid DLC and we gave it a review and everything. But then, surprising everyone, Warner Bros. *unreleased* the game. Good news if you have found yourself missing it – MultiVersus officially re-releases in May. **BY KYLE HILLIARD** ■

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1 to 4-Player Fighting (4-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Warner Bros. Games
DEVELOPER Player First Games **RELEASE** May 28

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GI MUST PLAY

DRAGON'S DOGMA 2

On the shoulders of giants

Creating a sequel to a 12-year-old game is never an easy task. Recapturing the magic of the original while implementing modern technology and design strategies can mangle the core values that made the original special. Dragon's Dogma 2 never loses sight of its roots, and constantly finds big and small ways to surprise me even 50 hours in. At its core, Dragon's Dogma 2 captures a sense of adventure. While you're the center point of the conflict and strife in the world, Dragon's Dogma 2 isn't afraid to make you feel small. Around every bend, it reminds you that you're just one part of a larger whole.

The game doesn't waste any time setting the stage for the political power struggles and the role you play in them. The main plot serves as your reason for adventuring, but it isn't until the last roughly 15 hours that it takes some big swings and absolutely nails them.

The capital city of Vernworth, where you will spend large chunks of the game, is a bustling town with merchant stalls lining the streets, the affluent noble quarters and their gaudy homes, and the castle grounds guarded to the teeth. NPCs roam around, shop, and stumble into you with quests and smaller tasks for you to handle. It pushes the notion that people live their lives whether you're around or not.

However, the majority of this game is traveling outside the safety of the city walls and testing your mettle in the wild. Every adventure I set forth on required me to think in novel ways about how I needed to prepare. I constantly juggled the weight of my pack versus the healing items and camping materials I would need to survive. Dragon's Dogma 2 makes every step outside of the city walls a critical decision and one I loved making.

Vocations offer different classes for you to use in combat. While I spent most of my time as a Thief, which excels at scaling large monsters like Cyclops or Griffons, there's plenty to choose from. The Sorcerer's slow, powerful magic casting is vastly different from the quick and deadly blade of the Mystic Spearhand. Dragon's Dogma 2 invites experimentation, and you can choose from these Vocations at will, granted you've completed some of the questlines to unlock them.

Combat is brutal, long, and can leave you and your party on your last leg. The further you stray from the village and the longer you stay out imposes incredible risk. However, it's a risk I happily took and one that always felt like the reward was high enough, even if my party died trying.

The Pawn system from the original game returns, allowing you to create your central party member, customize their looks, vocations, and even their attitude toward players. The new improvements to the system are smart and incentivize you to experiment with other players' Pawns. I constantly switched out Pawns at every Rift Stone I could to see the best party composition possible, and it made all of the difference in battle. Having a team of fighters allowed me to swiftly trounce monsters, even if it meant not having a healer and relying on potions or scavenged fruit. These constant small decisions feed into the game's larger idea of player freedom.

Your Pawns are instrumental in taking down the gruesome foes of Dragon's Dogma 2. Whether it's the hulking nature of the Minotaur or the sharp and jagged claws of a Griffon, Dragon's Dogma 2 revels in its spectacle, making every battle a nailbiter.

However, large-scale battles are where you will see the performance on consoles take a big hit. When I had multiple enemies on screen, and a pawn would cast a big spell, the frame rate would dip tremendously.

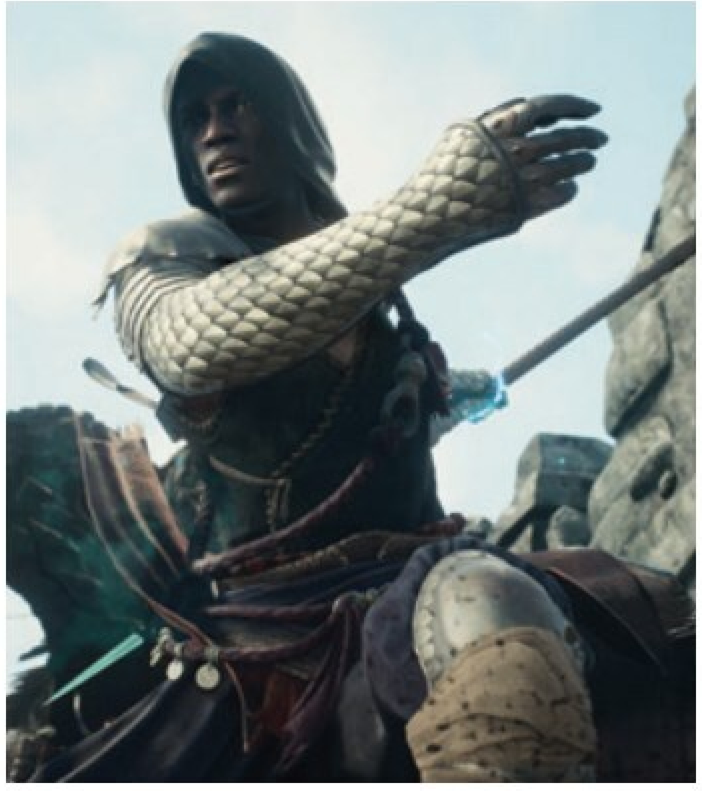
Map markers and icons are few and far between in Dragon's Dogma 2. It often feels like you're playing detective and leaning into the role-playing elements; having a eureka moment when uncovering clues about a person's whereabouts never gets old. On a few occasions, I wasn't given enough information to deduce the location of an NPC or monster correctly. This dilemma led me on a wild goose chase that felt unearned and a little tedious, especially because there are few fast travel options, so every time you leave the city, you're going to be gone for hours at a time.

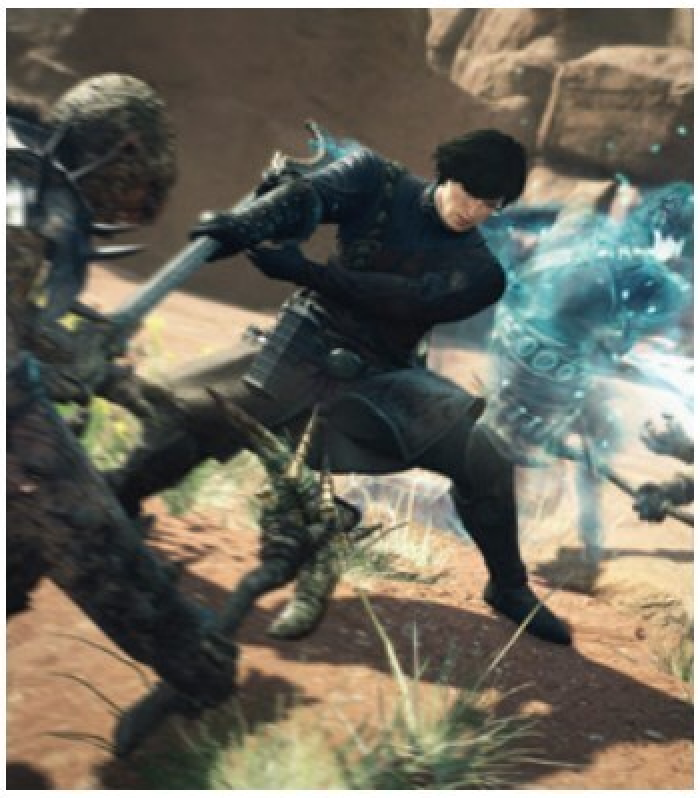
Dragon's Dogma 2 captures the spirit of the original without sanding down the edges of what made it excellent. Its insistence on player exploration and discovery, coupled with an ending I will think about for the rest of the year, makes Dragon's Dogma 2 a standout game and a worthy successor.

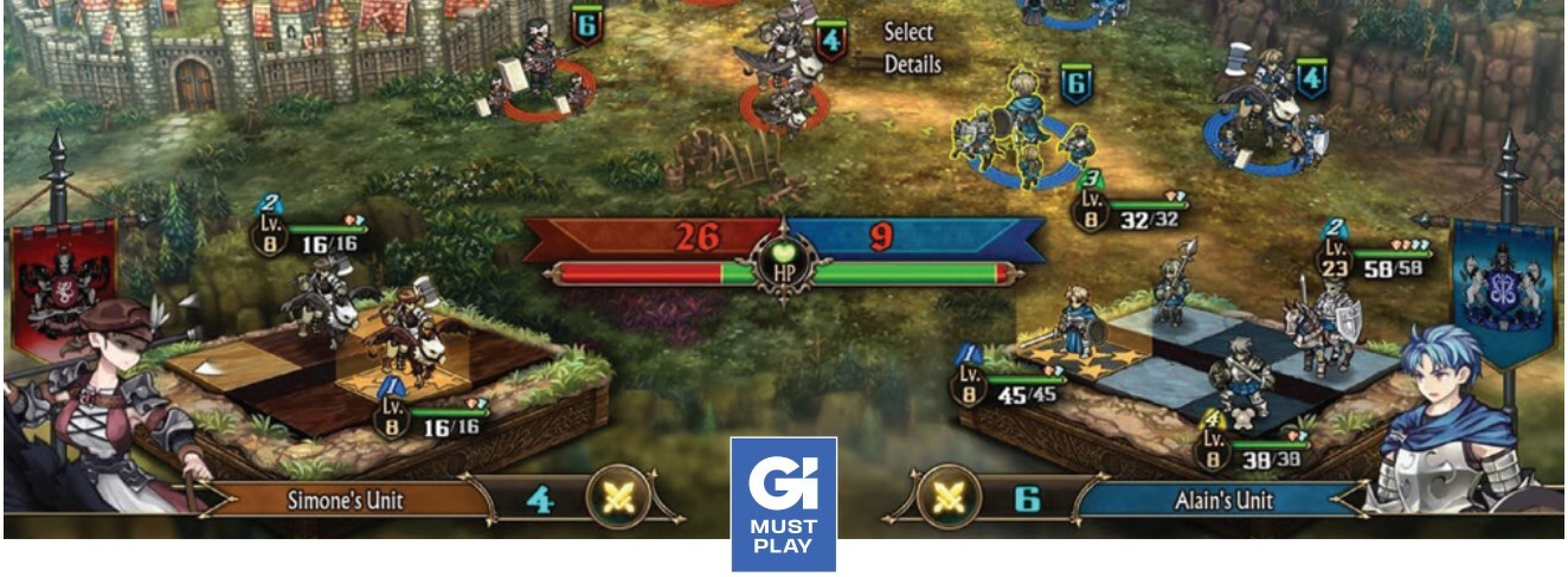
BY JESSE VITELLI

9

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Capcom
DEVELOPER Capcom **RELEASE** March 22 **RATING** M







GI MUST PLAY

UNICORN OVERLORD

Tactical superiority

Draw from enough unique inspirations, and eventually, a game begins to feel entirely novel. That's the sensation that emerges as you play Unicorn Overlord, Vanillaware's vast fantasy adventure of tactics, strategy, and storytelling. I was consistently reminded of other systems and mechanics from prior genre releases, but the resulting combination felt original and entertaining, even after many hours of battle and exploration.

Players control a young, exiled prince in a high fantasy world as he gradually gathers an army to take down an all-powerful empire. There's a significant focus on story and character development from beginning to end. The fact that the plentiful "thees and thous" frame an especially trope-heavy and familiar plot doesn't diminish the enjoyment. Instead, I was delighted by the confident and well-written dialogue and its willingness to embrace the fun of countless long-lost siblings, figures in disguise, and redemptive character arcs. By the end, some interesting choices let you shape the game's outcome, but this isn't a game of bold narrative surprises – simply well-told comfort-food fantasy antics.

Unicorn Overlord is awash in systems that govern your army's advancement and improvement. Whether it's equipment, honor, renown, gold, or character level, the primary goal is growing your army, promoting your combatants, expanding the potential size of each unit, and setting up a team that can triumph in the field. Everything works together admirably, and it's great fun to tweak each small squad unit to create unstoppable combos of damage, defense, and healing.

Battles are an intriguing mix of real-time troop movement and small unit-to-unit skirmishes. By adjusting each character's formation placement and tactical decision-making before a melee, you set them up for success. However, once an exchange begins, your role as commander is in the back seat; you can't affect the outcome anymore – only watch as it plays out. As such, much of the gameplay is about clever unit placement, movement, use of items, and pre-battle powers. I enjoyed overseeing a large and diverse army of knights, witches, gryphon riders, and elven archers as they strode into a righteous rebellion.

Vanillaware's attention to detail and high production value are on full display. The vast top-down overworld is stacked with detail and vibrant, illustrated backdrops. The score is grand and dramatic, accompanied by a tremendous bounty of memorable voice acting. Most notably, both story moments and unit battles unfold featuring the studio's striking trademark art and animation style, which leverages exaggerated deformation of everything from weapons to character curves and musculature to accentuate the fantasy setting and tone.

While I consistently enjoyed my dozens of hours with Unicorn Overlord, the latter half of the game begins to show some cracks in the fun. Because you can preview the outcome of each battle (which is good), many players will eventually do what I did, and begin to skip the bombastic visuals of a given skirmish to get on with the larger battle. The thrill of those lavishly illustrated scenes sadly begins to lean toward tedium.

Likewise, the plentiful unit types you both recruit and face in battle are initially intriguing but eventually become extremely challenging to keep straight. Imagine a game of "Rock, Paper, Scissors" where you can throw any one of dozens of distinct hand signs, and you can see the dilemma. Tactical complexity is good, but I ultimately found keeping all the distinctions straight slowed down the pacing and sense of mastery rather than enhancing an already rich tactical simulation. Combine those two problems, and late-game battles can feel repetitive and muddled.

Even acknowledging those frustrations, I love the variety of encounters Unicorn Overlord presents and the seamless way so many interlocking game systems contribute to an overarching saga of magic and warfare. From beginning to end, the game feels crafted, balanced, and deep, without sacrificing approachability. Set aside preconceptions from the unusual name, and you'll find an epic well worth exploring. **BY MATT MILLER**

8.5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing/Strategy
PUBLISHER Atlus **DEVELOPER** Vanillaware **RELEASE** March 8 **RATING** T

RISE OF THE RŌNIN

Crossed swords

“In a mad world, only the mad are sane,” a stirring line from Akira Kurosawa’s 1985 samurai epic *Ran*, urges us to remember that in times of chaos, strange or unconventional ideas may actually be wise. In Rise of the Rōnin, I argue Team Ninja exemplifies that madness with an open-world title far outside its usual comfort zone. Unfortunately, even in a mad world, seeing the wisdom in many of the decisions made here is difficult.

Rise of the Rōnin is Team Ninja’s first open world, set against a backdrop of 19th century Japan to tell a historical story of political upheaval and revolution. As a new pathway for a developer that primarily focuses on tightly designed levels, there is little to be upset about in its open-world execution. It is, lamentably, about as standard as open-world design comes, with content littered across the map but little of it compelling enough to seek out.

Collecting cats for one quest-giver, foreign books for another, photographs for a third, and so on, starts out feeling shallow and only ends up crumbling into busywork that grates over time more than it enhanced. These activities are clearly meant to freshen up the standard gameplay loop with distractions, but they left me scratching my head at the necessity of being an open-world game in the first place.

As a successor to games like Nioh and Wo-Long: Fallen Dynasty, Rise of the Rōnin once again employs Team Ninja’s parry-heavy core to an impressive degree. Even when I might prefer to use stealth, most missions eventually become parry-fests where I wait for an enemy to get aggressive and go back and forth until I can perform a critical attack in return. Like those previous games in Team Ninja’s portfolio, it is consistently exciting to successfully parry every strike of an enemy’s combo and make them pay for it.

Where Rōnin suffers is how intensely concentrated the game is on this single mechanic, as fun as it may be, to the exclusion of all other variety. The repetition of solving every single problem in the game with parries takes an often enjoyable action and forces me to do it thousands of times with little in the way of combat diversity. I began to feel like a hammer in a world full of nails with a litany of the same tasks to do that lost their novelty long before I hit the credits, regardless of the different stances and skills that do not feel especially additive to the experience.

Team Ninja made a conscious effort to limit enemies to humans in this history-based story, as opposed to the demons and monsters and other supernatural creatures of the night. While understandable, this self-imposed restriction to the assortment of enemies exacerbates the echoing monotony that builds toward the end of the game. There are only so many Very Large Men with Two Swords I could come across before feeling like I had fought entirely too many of them.

Rise of Rōnin’s sweeping green fields and cascading waves of falling red leaves paint a beautiful picture that the game’s graphical prowess does not keep up with. Aesthetically, it makes the open world feel peaceful, but sometimes shoddy character models and simplistic environments break that immersion in half. The game’s graphical fidelity mode is borderline unplayable, with framerates that would test even the most stalwart frame-ignorer of their tolerances.

Almost nothing in Rise of Rōnin is outright bad, but it is Exhibit A in any argument about why action games are not dozens of hours long or why open-world designs do not fit every mold. For all the inspirations the game wears on its sleeve, it never rises above them, and thus feels like a title in search of an identity and desperate for a specific kind of player. It’s sometimes a good time, just not for a long time. **BY IMRAN KHAN**

7

PLATFORM PS5 **STYLE** 1-Player Action (1 to 3-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Sony Interactive Entertainment **DEVELOPER** Team Ninja **RELEASE** March 22 **RATING** M

PRINCESS PEACH: SHOWTIME

Unassuming encore

We've played as Peach in plenty of Mario-starring games through the years, but not since 2005's Super Princess Peach has the artist formerly known as Princess Toadstool been the exclusive protagonist of her own journey. Princess Peach: Showtime is a wholly original adventure with an impressive amount of unique mechanics, but it fails to reach the platforming heights Nintendo has attained with its other characters in the past.

Showtime's overall premise is one of the highlights as it creates an aesthetically interesting world that is able to look and play differently from level to level but still maintain a consistent and welcoming style. While visiting a theatre to take in a show, the facility is attacked by the Sour Bunch for reasons that are ultimately unimportant. What is important is Peach is put in charge of returning everything to normal because she happens to be present and capable – a classic *Die Hard* scenario.

The design of every level leans into the theatre premise with a spotlight following Peach as she progresses, set changes marking new areas, and strings from the rafters being used to make elements look like they're floating through the air. Seeing what every new stage looks like is fun, even for the repeated themes, but Peach's costume changes are the primary focus.

Peach has more than 10 costumes that dictate her distinct abilities in different levels and while they are not all winners, they are all at least solid. I particularly like the ninja costume with its breezy combat and goofy stealth abilities, but then there are costumes like the detective that I found laborious to use. Meanwhile, costumes like the dashing thief and the cowboy that function similarly (one casts out a line with a grappling gun, the other casts out a line with a lasso) feel different thanks to the unique levels they are placed in.

The art direction and presentation are well done, but I struggled sometimes with the difficulty. Not because the game is hard – Showtime is an easy game by design – but there are occasions where I found specific jumps or minigames annoying to complete. It plays like a great first game for a new player to potentially enjoy alongside a parent, but there are little pockets where I had to time attacks properly or make a number of timed jumps that felt too hard in the context of the rest of the game. The challenge sits in an uncomfortable middle ground of being too easy for veteran players but not easy enough for rookies.

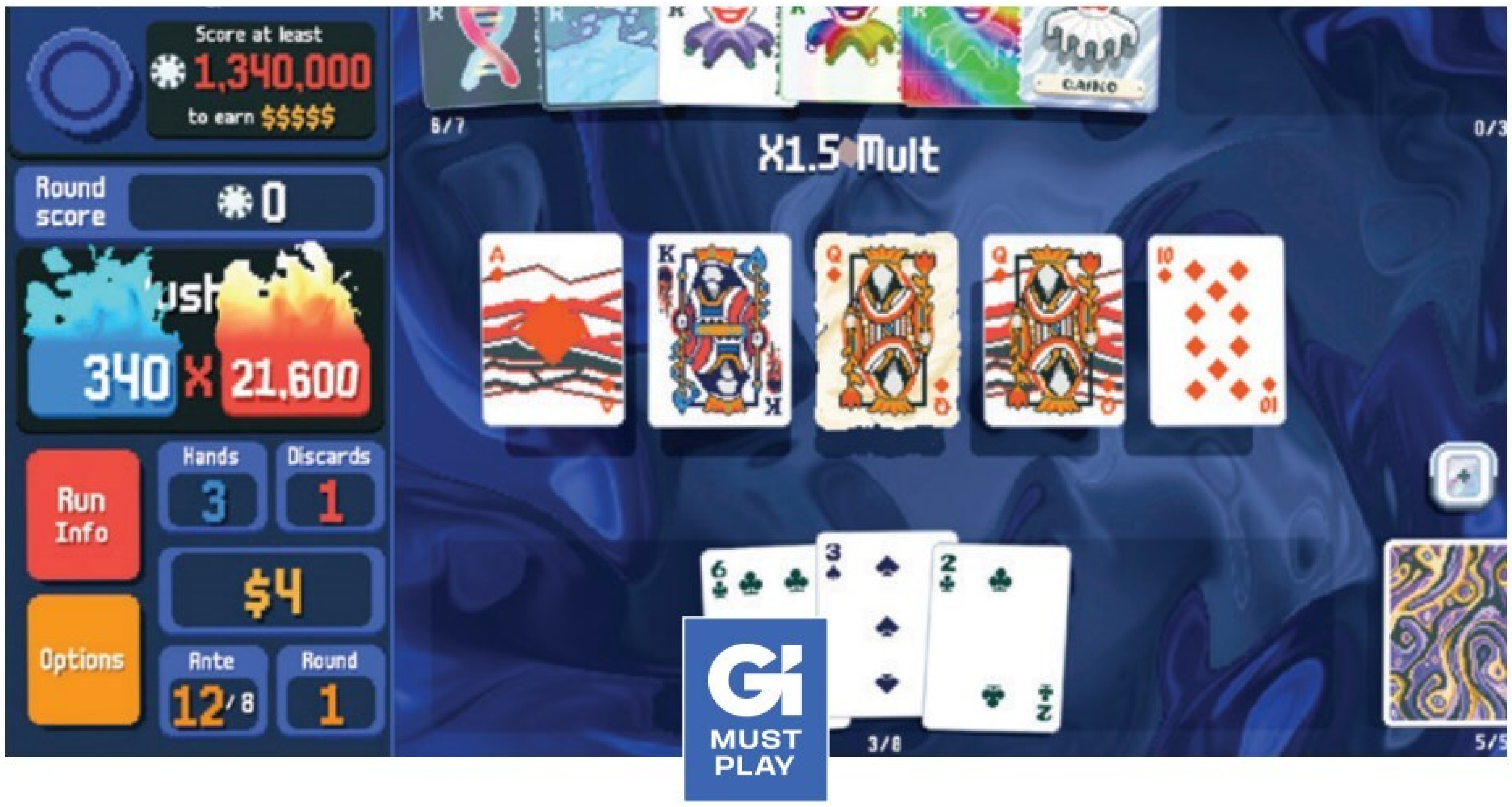
The rewards for collecting coins also underwhelm. I enjoyed seeing Peach adopt all kinds of different outfits and styles in the levels, but the only option for unlocks with your hard-earned money outside the levels are different patterns for Peach's iconic dress. I am disappointed there weren't options for completely different dress styles.

I also got distracted occasionally by Showtime's performance. I am not a player overly concerned with framerates; I prefer 60 FPS, but will happily take 30 FPS, as long as it is consistent, which is where this game struggles. Showtime hitches occasionally, not often during high-pressure moments, thankfully, but during the moments when you are relaxing in the theatre's main hallways. It's a plague the Switch hardware is dealing with more and more, and Showtime is just another reminder that the console is struggling.

Princess Peach: Showtime could be a decent first game for young Peach fans, but longtime Nintendo players looking for the Princess' equivalent of a quality Kirby platformer will likely be underwhelmed. Stylistically, however, the game is a success and, in typical Nintendo fashion, features an exciting finale. I just wish the difficulty had been more balanced in one direction or the other. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

7.5

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Nintendo
DEVELOPER Good-Feel **RELEASE** March 22 **RATING** E10+



BALATRO

A winning hand

I'm not a Poker player. I've never learned the game, and my limited knowledge of it largely stems from pop culture osmosis, such as James Bond films and referential quips from X-Men's Gambit. I couldn't tell you what makes a Royal Flush, but I know it's good to have it. Despite its premise and appearance, Balatro technically isn't Poker. It is, however, the first title to make me understand and enjoy the core premise of the card game. It also happens to be one of the most engrossing games of the year.

Calling Balatro a Poker game would be disingenuous. You don't even play against other opponents. It's actually a Poker-inspired roguelike deckbuilder. Over a series of rounds, you're tasked with playing the best hand possible to score a minimum number of chips to advance to the next round. You begin with a standard 52-card deck and only draw four hands (with limited discards) to fulfill this score criteria. The most prominent Poker element is learning how to assemble various types of hands, such as a Flush, Straight, or Full House. Thankfully, a helpful glossary illustrating what each type of hand looks like and their score values is just a button click away. This simple and accessible reference has allowed me to memorize Poker hands for the first time, expediting my enjoyment of Balatro.

Three Blinds (basically rounds) make up an Ante, and you win a game by completing eight Antes. Lose a round, and you start from the first Ante. Balatro would be enjoyable if it simply consisted of this straightforward premise, but the magic comes in how it incorporates the roguelike genre's satisfying power climb. You earn cash based on your performance each round, which in turn is used to purchase a variety of cards from booster packs with wacky abilities to augment your deck. Equipping up to five Joker cards, of which over 100 types exist, bestows passive effects or trigger abilities. Some add score multipliers for playing certain suits or bonus chips for not playing a face card. One of my favorites is a glitched Joker that multiplies my score by a random amount, adding a fun roulette element. Jokers dramatically alter the game in a plethora of neat ways, but it doesn't stop there.

Using consumables, such as Tarot, Planet, and Spectral cards, raise the score value of certain hand types, add more special effects to cards, and more. I love weighing the benefits and downsides of every ability and how they enhance or change my existing lineup. I'm constantly evolving my strategy, even when I settle into a winning formula. Balatro never overwhelms players with too many options at once, and your strength grows at a steady pace.

The result is a wildly fun roguelike that's hard to put down. With so many combinations of loadouts, discovering new Jokers and other cards leads to thrilling experimentation. Many effects complement each other, sometimes in unexpected ways, allowing for a variety of strategies I'm still uncovering. Balatro's flexibility lets players try many different deckbuilding styles, and everything feels viable with the right skill and luck.

Balatro is almost Vampire Survivors-esque in its satisfying escalation from playing small hands for decent points to setting off several card effects in succession as multipliers rise to the hundreds, causing your score meter to catch fire NBA Jam-style. Plus, playing well and trying new cards unlocks additional decks (each with unique, beneficial traits) along with new Jokers, booster packs, and more. This mechanic incentivizes me to try out cards I was initially skeptical about, and I discover new favorites while filling an in-game database of every available card in the game. Tack on challenging boss blinds, unlockable challenges and difficulties, and even the ability to save runs to share with other players, and Balatro's "one more run" hook is powerful. I'm still surprised how much time melts away while playing.

Balatro is an ingenious and entertaining roguelike and one of my favorite games of the year. Playing it has become a near-obsession; everything feels perfectly designed to encourage you to keep trying because that next run could be the run of your life. Even after hours of play, I still can't overcome Balatro's biggest challenge: putting it down. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

9.5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Strategy
PUBLISHER Playstack Ltd. **DEVELOPER** LocalThunk **RELEASE** February 20 **RATING** E10+

GI MUST PLAY

WWE 2K24

Another strong push

WWE 2K24 leverages WrestleMania's impending 40-year milestone to celebrate the event, and it proves to be a party worth attending. Enjoyable additions and smart improvements bolster its steadily improving formula, making it the strongest in-ring outing since the series' return.

2K24's control scheme remains largely unchanged from 2K23 but boasts neat new mechanics, such as the trading blows mini-game. This gamification of the back-and-forth "boo/yay" punch trope adds a fun wrinkle to combat. Other well-worn in-ring moments to receive attention include setting up big dives onto a mob of opponents; I rarely use it, but it's nice to have. That sentiment applies to the game's new match types: Casket, Ambulance, and Special Guest Referee. I'm generally lukewarm on these stipulations in real life and I won't be rushing to play them often here, but they're replicated well.

A staggering roster of over 200 Superstars out of the box varies from pretty good to spot-on in the looker department. Regardless of whose boots you wear, playing 2K24 remains a largely good hands-on experience, even if some moves could stand to be less mechanically dense. Existing match stipulations remain entertaining whether playing alone or online, though the latter destination is, at publishing, a tricky proposition thanks to spotty connections.

Showcase mode allows players to relive iconic bouts throughout the first 39 WrestleManias. Taking into account wrestlers who can't appear due to current employment in rival organizations or for being generally problematic, it's a strong curation of matches. Corey Graves' commentary during transitions to real footage adds a nice touch compared to last year's silent cutscenes. I also love that button prompts for objectives now appear on-screen, reducing trips to the menu screen to figure out how to execute a specific maneuver. Showcases' wacky finale isn't quite as memorable as last year's big twist, but the mode is an overall improvement over 2K23's rendition and a great celebration of WrestleMania that inspires me to rewatch my favorite matches from the event.

The dual story-driven journeys of MyRise present more narrative forks stemming from pivotal decision-making moments. Whether you play an indie legend navigating the mainstream waters of WWE or build the credibility of a low-card act chaotically thrust into the World Title picture, I like how choices pack more meaningful engagement to their overall enjoyable tales. Thankfully, created characters and unlockables finally carry over into more modes, adding deeper returns to my investment in MyRise.

Updates and additions to standard modes like MyGM, Universe, and MyFaction are relatively small but add welcomed depth. The already stellar creation suite sports additional items to build the coolest – or silliest – Superstars, arenas, entrances, or championships you can concoct, but don't expect any major changes to its reliable template.

2K24 sees Visual Concepts layer on quality new bricks to WWE 2K's strong foundation while sanding away some rough edges. The series has settled into an exceptional, if very familiar, blueprint, and I would love to see a bigger shake-up in the future, but the result offers the best package since the franchise returned in 2022. If you're a curious fan who's held off on jumping back into the digital ring, 2K24 is as good an argument as any to shake off the ring rust. For diehard enthusiasts, this year's entry won't bowl you over in the broad sense, but its incremental updates and continued polish make it a worthy contender for another year. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

8.5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Fighting (8-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Visual Concepts **DEVELOPER** 2K **RELEASE** March 8 **RATING** T

MLB THE SHOW 24

While it isn't a hyper-creative leap forward, MLB The Show 24 finds a new swing by tethering style and strategy to baseball's fundamentals. **BY JOSHUA KHAN**

8.5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch
STYLE 1 to 4-Player Sports (8-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Sony Interactive Entertainment, MLB **DEVELOPER** Sony San Diego Studio
RELEASE March 19 **RATING** E

CONTRA: OPERATION GALUGA

While far from a one-to-one remake, Contra: Operation Galuga effectively captures the spirit of the original game while modernizing just enough to make for an exciting, albeit short, adventure. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

P1
BILL RIZER
x3

8

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1 to 4-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Konami **DEVELOPER** WayForward
RELEASE March 12 **RATING** T

PENNY'S BIG BREAKAWAY

It's a shame so many problems weigh on this otherwise enjoyable adventure. Even with the screen-crowding, bugs, and depth-perception troubles, I still look back fondly on the superb level design and movement mechanics. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

7

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Platforming
PUBLISHER Private Division **DEVELOPER** Evening Star **RELEASE** February 21 **RATING** E

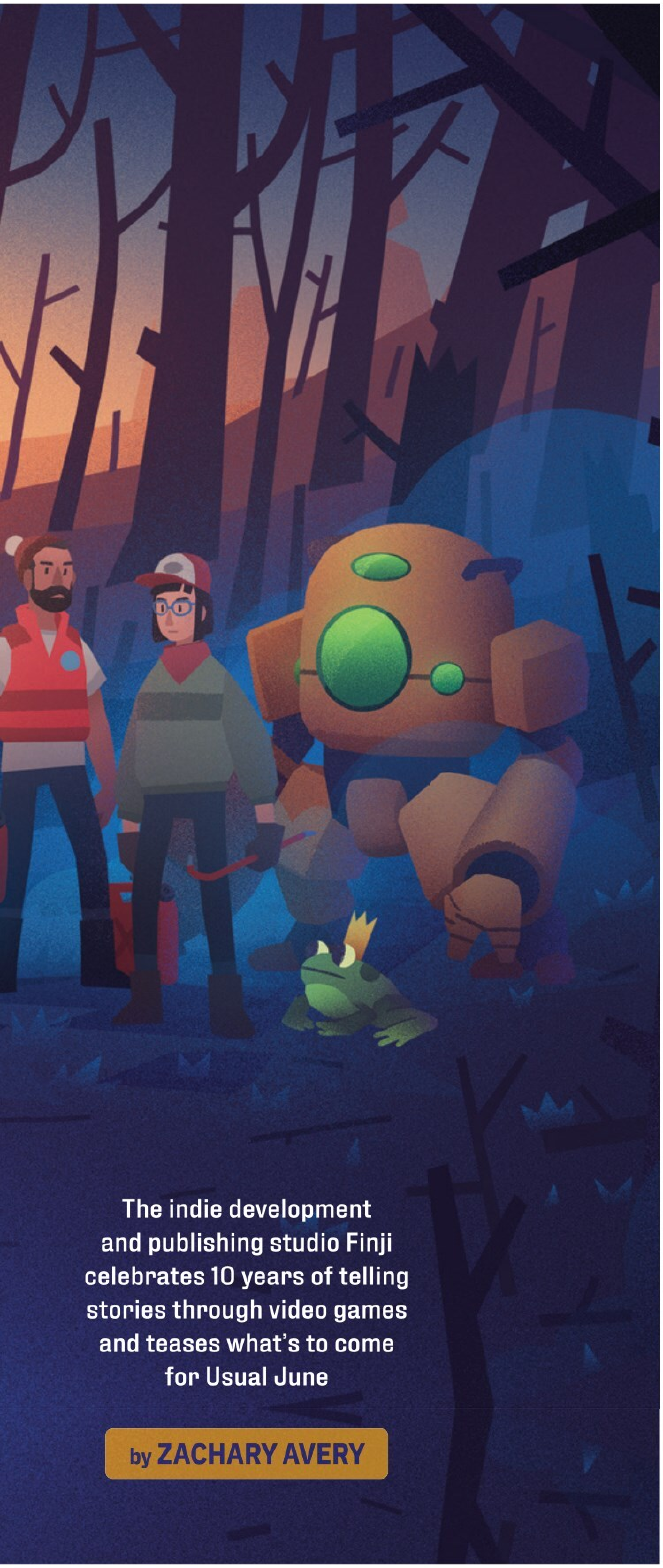
PEPPER GRINDER

Pepper Grinder is an innovative indie experience, packed with tense battles, fluid platforming, and eye-catching visual design. While its short runtime left me wanting more, I'm happy with what it is: a bright action platformer that's anything but a grind. **BY CHARLES HARTE** ■

8

PLATFORM Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action/Platforming
PUBLISHER Devolver Digital **DEVELOPER** Ahr Ech **RELEASE** March 28 **RATING** E10+

A Family of Games



The indie development and publishing studio Finji celebrates 10 years of telling stories through video games and teases what's to come for Usual June

by ZACHARY AVERY

> **Working with them is working with friends.**
>
> – Andrew Shouldice, creator of Tunic

In 2009, a video game called Canabalt was published on the iOS App Store. It had a simple premise: Your character flees through a crumbling urban landscape, making great leaps across rooftops at the touch of your phone screen. It met great success and charted in what was then only a burgeoning mobile game ecosystem. Canabalt popularized the infinite runner genre and would ultimately put its designer, Adam Saltsman, on the map.

Now working under the name of Finji as its creative director, Adam's rise as a designer as well as his partner's, Bekah Saltsman, as both a publisher and CEO, has been stunning to watch, especially considering the simplicity of that first big hit. Whether you're playing the bass guitar as Mae Borowski in Night In The Woods, organizing patchwork-colored boxes in Wilmot's Warehouse, or floating listlessly through space in Capsule, Finji continues to offer memorable, beautiful experiences from trailblazing game designers unlike any other.

But for Adam and Bekah, in those early days of entering the indie game industry, everything always led back to that original, impossible question: How do you even make a video game?

BRIDGING THE GAP

For as long as Adam can remember, he wanted to be a video game artist. Fascinated with the vibrant colors and rich SunSoft sound chips of original NES cartridges, the video games of his childhood quickly took over his imagination. He designed his own levels for Super Mario Bros. on sheets of grid paper. He ordered floppy disks with the Wolfenstein level editor built-in. He experimented with the Doom level editor, then eventually the Quake editor. However, despite being a part of this growing generation of designers with a dream to create console games that felt like some of their childhood favorites, it was never clear how exactly you get from hobbyist to career.

"That gap, in the early 1990's in rural Michigan, is a very wide gap," Adam says.

→ Art by Wren Farren

Upon graduating from the University of Michigan alongside Bekah, the Saltsmans made the move out to where the ever-growing indie scene was just beginning to flourish: Austin, Texas. An environment with excellent studios and cheap rent seemed the perfect place for Adam to cut his teeth and enter the industry. Unfortunately, getting your foot in the door at major developers of the time was much more complicated than anticipated, so he looked to other routes. In 2006, Adam transitioned into tech contractor work to dedicate sufficient time toward launching his and Bekah's new studio, Last Chance Media. Beginning with only a few days each month, the two created simple, arcade-feeling Flash and iOS games that promoted simple game mechanics and aesthetic sensibilities that fit into Adam's love for pixel art and incredible game soundtracks. Around this time, Adam's first major titles begin appearing: Canabalt, Gravity Hook, and Fathom. Adam's platformer, Fathom, had an especially intriguing finale that took some of his fans at the time by surprise – a boss fight you could not win.

"You die, and you have this bizarre exploration experience," Adam says. "You find this door at the bottom of the ocean, it opens up, and you sink down into it."

Until that point, the Saltsmans' stories in games always seemed to present something both unexpected and unnerving: a sinking robot, a crumbling city, a suffocating space mission. The games were always fun and engaging, but they had something larger to say. Each new project from Adam and Bekah were then examples of both creativity in design and were challenging the idea of what a game could even look like. That philosophy would eventually spur the change of Last Chance Media into their latest team-up and best-known collaboration: Finji.

Bottom: Overland

Right (from the top): Canabalt, Night In The Woods, I Was A Teenage Exocolonist, Wilmot's Warehouse

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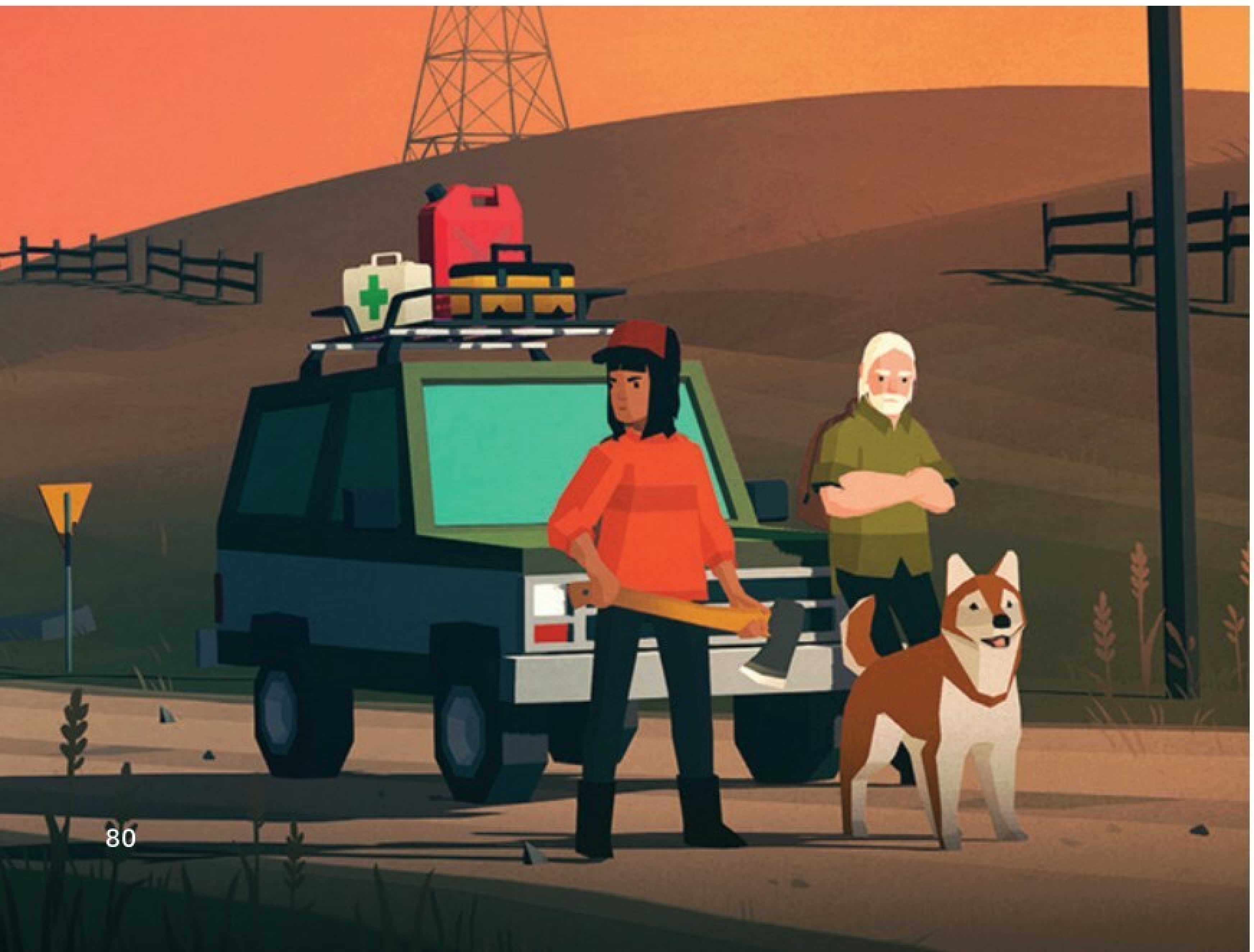

FINJI BEGINS

Having scraped and saved for nearly 10 years, the Saltsmans were finally ready to unveil their development studio, Finji, on March 3, 2014, along with its first major internal project: Overland. It marked an exceptionally creative endeavor for Adam and Bekah, leaving behind action platforming in favor of eerie, strategic grid-based movement. Any given level is presented from a bird's eye view, showing various interactable elements for your character and hiding others within obscuring shadows.

"The diorama, at a glance, should look like a little apocalyptic story," Adam said. "That was the rule for the level design: there should clearly be your characters, menacing forces and an escape route."

However, before they could reach that final product, the Saltsmans put out a very candid, transparent request on their blog, seeking animators and audio engineers who weren't looking to create something that sounded or looked like anything else on the market. Rather than base qualifications simply on prior experience or padded portfolios, they ensured interested artists were considered through paid, practical demos and tests that proved their intuition and problem-solving skills rather than simply their past work.

Adam and Bekah have always been keenly aware of the toxicity in some of the gaming industry's highest-stake work environments, particularly regarding "crunch time" before release. That attitude bleeds not only into their game development but also into their relationships with creators as studio publishers themselves. In fact, before they agreed to publish Tunic with creator Andrew Shouldice, they mentored him on the project for years prior. This way, Finji could view Shouldice's work on the game not only from a marketability, quality-assurance, or localization perspective (which was crucial) but also as fellow creative partners.

"Our relationship didn't start with a publishing negotiation; it started with them taking time to give a stranger some feedback and advice," Shouldice said. "It's that willingness to help that I think makes them such an important part of the game development community."

Another of Finji's published games, Wilmot's Warehouse, first appeared as a part of Humble Monthly on Steam, but creator Richard Hogg knew that in order to improve the game's performance and expand its audience, he would need a proper publisher. While Hogg had worked with various publishing groups before, it seemed that Finji was especially capable of providing a friendly, cooperative relationship in which everyone involved could have input on the game's design. Much like an indie record label that emerges from veteran bands supporting younger artists, Finji's own history in creating games sets it apart from other publishers.

"Finji is exactly like this, and, just like with those labels, there is an integrity and a camaraderie that naturally comes out of it," Hogg said.

Ten years after those initial Overland blog posts, Finji is still looking for projects unlike anything else and continues to make space for game developers and creators who wouldn't usually be in the room. In Adam's experience, he's found that indie developers often fit into two modes: People who want to make games just like their favorites or people who want to make games that correct the flaws in those same titles and invent something new. More often, however, a Finji game fits in neither category. There would be no Chicory: A Colorful Tale without Link's Awakening. No Canabalt without Mirror's Edge. No Night In The Woods without one of Adam's own personal favorites: Kentucky Route Zero.

"You are giving the player an experience they otherwise would not have had," Bekah said. "They are able to experience games in a way that they've never experienced games before. That idea is fed through Night In The Woods."

Seven years since Night In The Woods' initial release, the game continues to leave as much of an impact as it did when fans first played it. Its casual platforming roots meant for an especially approachable gaming experience, and Scott Benson's wholly unique art direction helped the game transcend its medium and find itself in myriad forms; fan art, tattoo designs, cosplays, and more.

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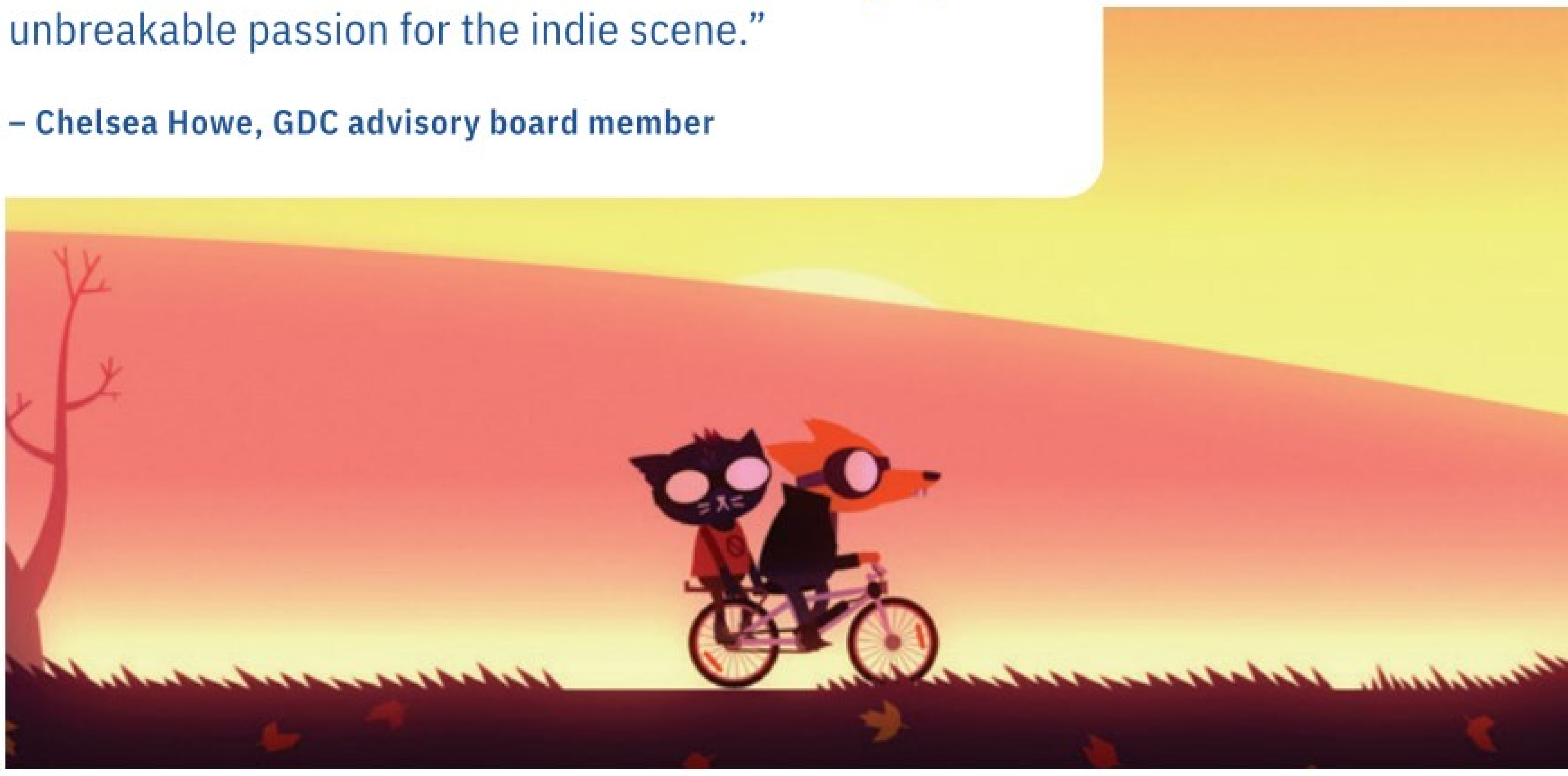
Perhaps the most recognizable aspect of Finji, beyond their award-winning games, is its logo: a ferret wearing a crown. Designed by Richard Hogg (creator of Finji's published title, Wilmot's Warehouse), the design embodies two very important parts of the founders Adam and Bekah Saltsmans' lives.

The crown is representative of their eldest son, Kingsley, while the ferret mascot is a sly reference to Marty Stouffer's *Wild America* on PBS, which featured a mob of pet ferrets in one episode. The scene showing their escape is a favorite of Adam's.

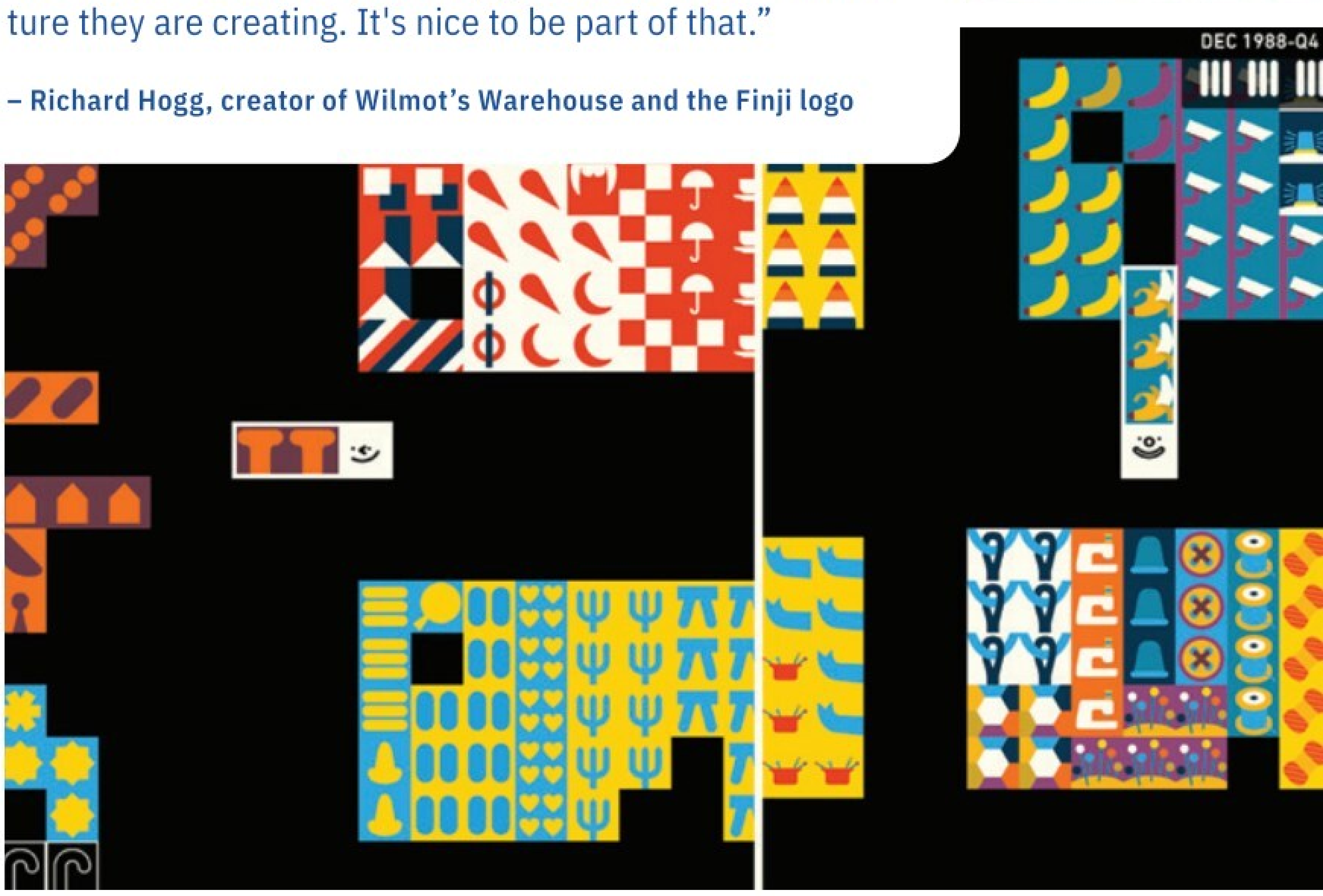
As for "Finji," the studio's name serves as a loving homage to the childhood nickname for their youngest son, Finnegan.

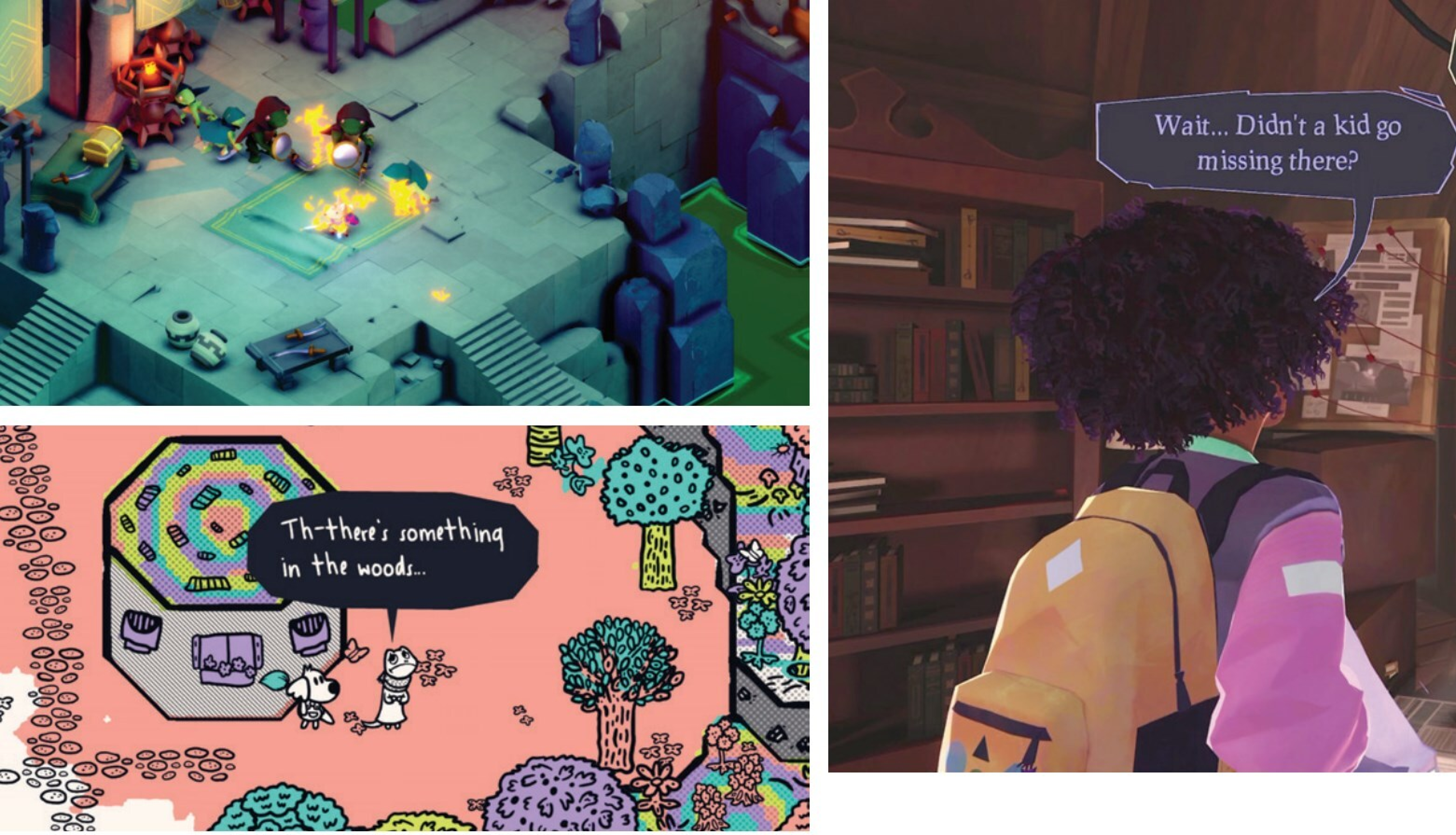
Combining elements of the Saltsmans' humor, inventiveness, and nostalgia were paramount in Hogg's logo design.

> They give opportunities to teams who deserve to be seen and heard, to games that make our world better and our industry richer. I cannot overstate their integrity and unbreakable passion for the indie scene."
>
> **– Chelsea Howe, GDC advisory board member**



> It feels like every game they publish has to make sense in the context of all the other Finji games and the overall culture they are creating. It's nice to be part of that."
>
> **– Richard Hogg, creator of Wilmot's Warehouse and the Finji logo**




Th-there's something in the woods...
Wait... Didn't a kid go missing there?

Top: Tunic

Middle: Chicory: A Colorful Tale

Right: Usual June

"There were thousands upon thousands of responses on social media, from people who discovered it last week to people who discovered it seven years ago, talking about how that game not only changed what games were for them but also changed them as a person," Bekah said.

The sheer approachability and ease of access toward Finji games like Night In The Woods remains one of the studio's hallmark factors and one the Saltsmans pride themselves on. "No Fail" mode was included in Tunic so combat-averse players can still enjoy the adventure. In the BAFTA award-winning Chicory: A Colorful Tale, you have a fast-paced, engaging action-adventure that still relies on a touching story about creativity and passion. In these same seminal titles, Finji brings together creative teams and designers who lend their original voices to the blossoming indie game industry.

"Chicory is a great example because you have somebody who maybe hasn't art directed a game that size before, and so it looks super special," Adam said. "And you have very subversive gameplay. You don't hurt anybody in Chicory."

These past 10 years, Finji has shown that person-first, supportive video game publishing and development can lead to higher quality experiences, never sacrificing camaraderie for crunch. The unifying factor between their games, then, is the incredible attention to detail each of their gathered teams present toward story, setting and character.

"You can tell these all go together, even though none of them look the same," Bekah said. "They have this hyper-dedication to place, where the place is an extra character in the game that has motivations that act out upon the player."

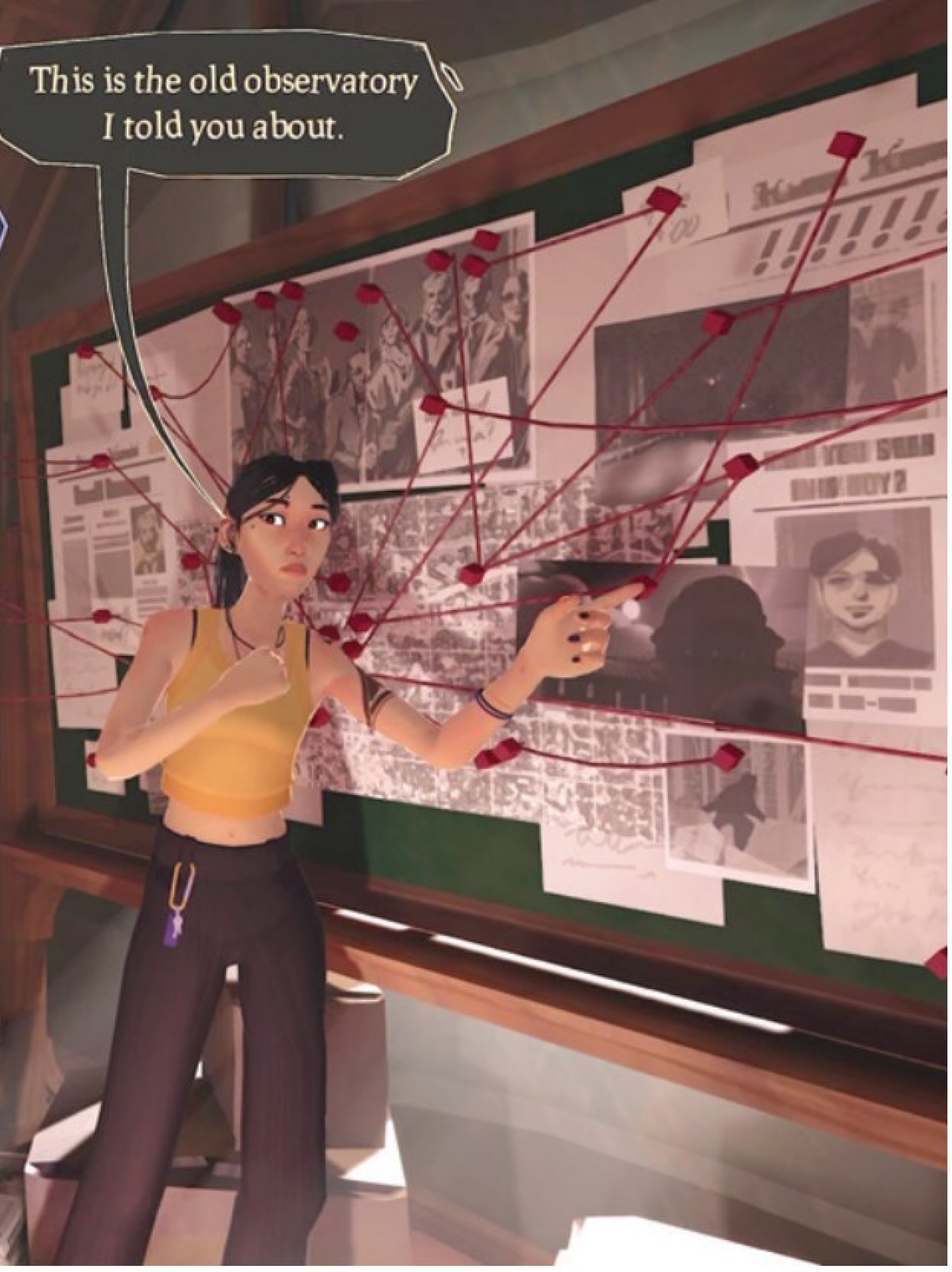
Nowhere will this be truer than in Finji's upcoming 2025 title.

SPIRITUAL SUCCESSOR

Overlapping with the marketing and releases of both Tunic and I Was A Teenage Exocolonist (from Sarah Northway, marking the first woman-led release with Finji) development began for Finji's newest title, Usual June, in February 2021. The fundamental design was going to be very different from its past published releases, like Tunic. Usual June would be a more bespoke and considered experience, less so an open-world for the player to freely explore. It's also the first development project from Finji since Overland's release in 2019. But while Overland and Usual June are both stories about the end of the world, the latter marks another major genre departure for the Saltsmans and Finji: a 3D action-adventure.

"An initial inspiration was Secret Of Mana, which is Bekah's favorite game," Adam said. "It has real-time battles with dodging and charge attacks. We thought, let's take the guts of that."

Usual June is a paranormal story, fundamentally a mystery story, but not with a normal, formulaic detective structure. The playable character, June, has the supernatural ability to speak with ghosts,



“Finji is proving time and time again that supporting indie games doesn't have to be about an ever-increasing scope and scale. There has always been and always will be beauty and art in finding genuinely interesting games from smaller studios and working with this unusual intentionality to put the games and developers on the pedestal they deserve for all to see.”

– Nigel Lowrie, chief marketing officer at Devolver Digital

I think what really shines about Finji to me is that continued attention to the work of community care and stewardship. It's such a difficult job and I know that they take it incredibly seriously.”

– Wiley Wiggins, founding member of Fantastic Arcade

I've always really admired how vocal they both are about how they approach the challenges of making games, running a business (and raising a family while doing so), looking for funding, and existing in the games industry—all while trying to balance the work that they're passionate about and the lives they live outside of that.”

– Adriel Wallick, founder of Train Jam

which when combined with the “weird-looking, glowing stuff” (as Adam puts it) briefly shown in the trailer, you're left with the notes of impossibility lying at the root of Usual June's mystery. The worldbuilding for Finji and their narrative collaborator, Sweet Baby Inc., then became a sort of experiment: How would a normal-enough town of people react to sudden changes of supernatural phenomena? What are the consequences of learning about the paranormal beneath the surface?

“In Usual June, you will mostly see what June sees and mostly understand what June understands, which is not going to be everything,” Adam said. “There will be things that you don't fix, there will be some things that don't get explained or are too hard to explain. I hope that's one of the things that people love about it, that there's space to inhabit and think about it.”

One way players will be able to inhabit the mystery of June's town, Fen Harbor, more fully is through its inclusive storytelling within the detective-mystery as a whole. Rather than rely on checklists for June to mark down as the mystery comes to a close, Adam and Bekah lean further into the common tropes of some of their favorite sci-fi and supernatural mysteries, like *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, *I Am Not Okay With This*, and even, for Adam especially, the Godzilla films.

To demonstrate this, Adam began to act out a noir-like scene where a hard-hitting journalist might be visiting a mysterious character who knows more about the mystery than they're letting on. He proceeded to fish around and pick up miscellaneous objects from nearby shelves in order to seem aloof as he continued to question his suspect.

“Outside of Phoenix Wright, I've never seen a game work like that,” Adam said. “The story areas weren't a 3D space where you can wander around and look at weird stuff on the shelf while you banter with a character.”

With much more to learn about Usual June before its release sometime next year, the Saltsmans and their team at Finji look forward to teasing further secrets. How does a missing kid case fit into June's life? Where is this alternate world full of neon-colored caves and crystalline monsters? And what's the connection between June's powers and Teddy, her friendly ghost companion?

All of that remains to be answered... Or will it be?

“It's not going to be a game where all the things get explained,” Adam said. “A lot of the joy for us is going to live in leaving places for people to have fun in the fog.” ■

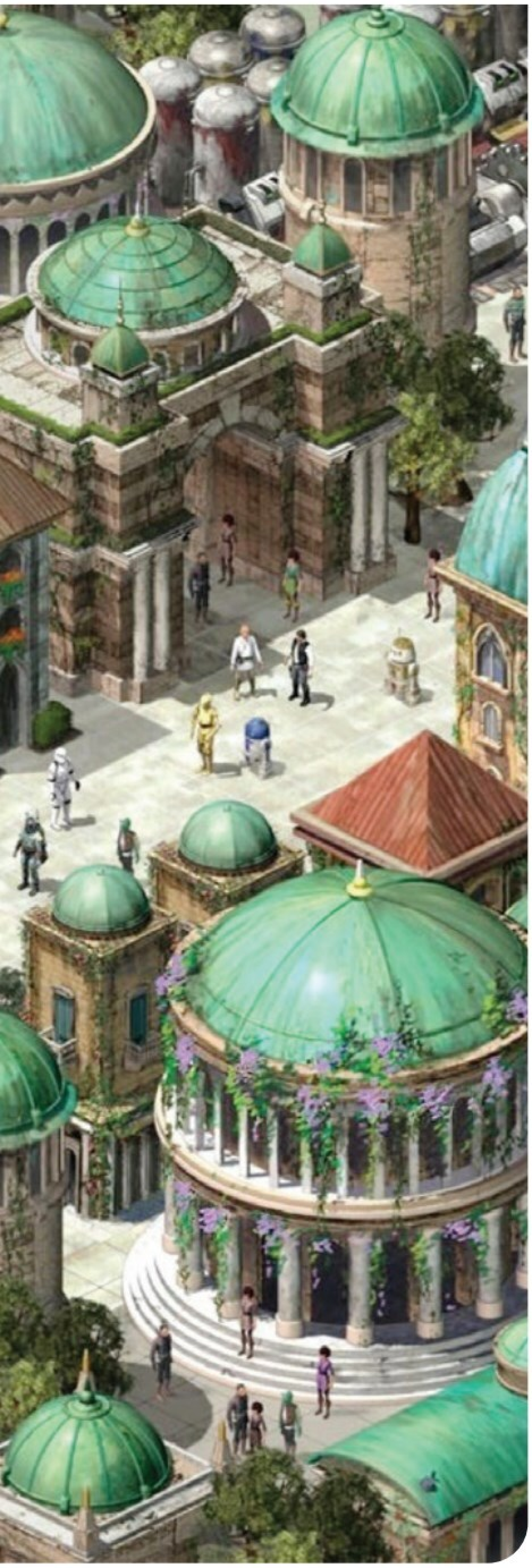
Adam and
Bekah Saltsman
↑

USUAL JUNE
GREG RULZ OK

ONE LAST THING

DISTURBANCES IN THE FORCE

STAR WARS IS ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR FRANCHISES OF ALL TIME, so it's no wonder the property has spawned so many video game adaptations. Unfortunately, games are canceled mid-development all the time, and the ones set in a galaxy far, far away are no exception. While our cover story celebrates a new Star Wars game, here's a look at some of the games that never were. BY CHARLES HARTE



STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT III

As a continuation of the beloved third-person shooter series, Battlefront III sounded great on paper. By combining ship and soldier combat with seamless ground-to-space combat maps, players would have lived iconic Star Wars battles with a new level of immersion. Despite being reportedly close to completion, LucasArts canceled the project two years into its development, allegedly due to its dissatisfaction with developer Free Radical Design.

BATTLE OF THE SITH LORDS

In this action game, players would control Darth Maul with violent combat featuring lightsaber dismemberment and more. Unfortunately, the game never progressed much further than the prototype phase, and even the development team was in the dark about how the game's story would end up looking. Shortly into development, Disney acquired Star Wars, and like Maul at the end of *Phantom Menace*, the game was cut short.

PROJECT RAGTAG

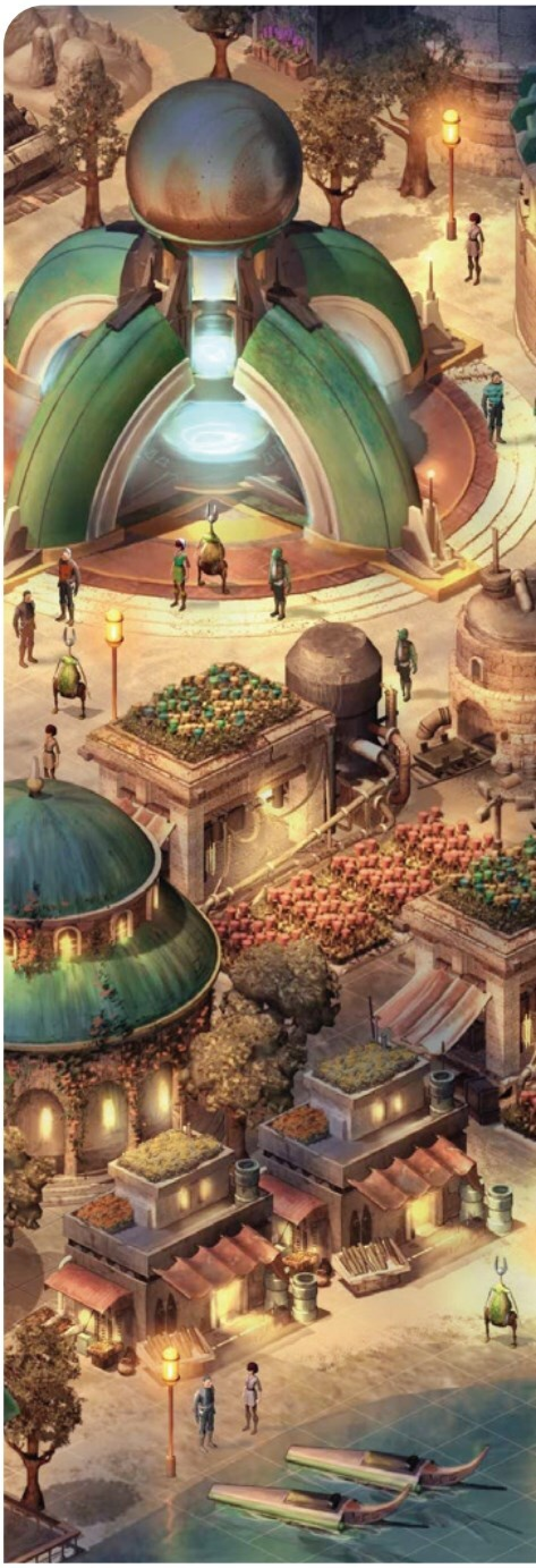
Helmed by Uncharted writer Amy Hennig, Project Ragtag – also known as Yuma – was a single-player action-adventure game set between episodes IV and V. Developed by Visceral Games (known for the Dead Space trilogy), the project went through several forms, from open-world space pirates to story-driven heist adventure. Ultimately, the game failed to impress EA, and Visceral Studios was shut down – with Project Ragtag alongside it.

STAR WARS OUTPOST

Described as Star Wars meets FarmVille, Outpost (pictured) would have players growing a settlement by building mines, shipyards, and farms, collecting resources, and trading with other players. Outposts could support the Rebel Alliance or the Empire, and popular characters could even visit if the town were prosperous enough.

STAR WARS 1313

Perhaps the most infamous canceled Star Wars game, 1313 was an action-adventure title where players explored the metropolitan planet Coruscant as bounty hunter Boba Fett. With input from George Lucas and a reveal at E3 2012, the shooter had amassed a sizable community of fans eagerly anticipating its release, but Disney's cancelation of the project in 2013 broke their collective hearts. ■



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